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# McGee, Marx, and the Masking of Social Oppression

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## An Ideographical Analysis of the Political Myth of the War on Poverty

A thesis submitted to Regis College Honors Program in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for graduation with Honors

By: Jonathan Denzler

May 2013



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And finally, to all those I do not name directly but who have played a large role in my education so far. Thanks.

\*\*\*\*\*

This thesis is dedicated to all those who currently live in poverty, and those who may come to live in poverty. To your unique story that holds hope for so many others.

# Chapter 1

## <Poverty>

“It's hard to do it because you gotta look people in the eye and tell 'em they're irresponsible and lazy. And who's gonna wanna do that? Because that's what poverty is, ladies and gentlemen. In this country, you can succeed if you get educated and work hard. Period. Period. I mean I know people from Haiti, from the Ukraine from eh, -- we got callers all day long on *The Factor*. From Romania. You come here, you get educated, you work hard, you'll make a buck. You get addicted, you don't know anything, you'll be poor.<sup>1</sup>” Bill O'Reilly *The Radio Factor* June 11, 2004

While discussing conservative icon Ronald Reagan's attempts to harness a radical politic during his time in the Oval Office, Bill O'Reilly is also addressing those who were cut from the lists of welfare recipients during the “New Beginning” of the 1980s.

O'Reilly argues that while such cuts were hard politically, they were necessary when we realize who inhabited the list of welfare recipients. O'Reilly's message is simple; if you are poor it is your own responsibility, it is your fault. For O'Reilly, to be poor is to be lazy. To be impoverished is to be unemployed due to lack of personal effort and motivation. If one immigrant can arrive and earn a job, then why can the rest of the country not follow as well?

This quote carries much more than its literal meaning, it offers a justification for otherizing, and ultimately rejecting the American poor. For the O'Reilly listener (who seems to not be poor if they have the spare time to tune into a political talk show) the image, of the poor individual, is presented as a universal critique of the impoverished. For the listener, O'Reilly is arguing that all who live in poverty are addicted to drugs,

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<sup>1</sup> Biedlingmaier, Matthew. "On Irish TV, O'Reilly Called Media Matters "an Assassination Website" That Takes Him "out of Context"" *Media Matters*. N.p., 20 Apr. 2007. Web. 21 May 2012.



lazy, and uneducated. This failure is not blamed on the larger superstructures of the American life, but rather on the impoverished individuals themselves. O'Reilly teaches us that poverty is avoidable if we buy into a certain work ethic, and a certain brand of patriotism.

While O'Reilly is just one conservative voice, his voice is unique due to the fact that millions can tune in and listen to what he believes. His voice holds weight because it is accessed by the masses and therefore can shape the personal beliefs of those same masses. The image of the poor, which is constructed by O'Reilly's viewers, clearly does not give any support to those who find themselves in a bad state of affairs, and rather it seeks to demonize their actions, without knowing what those individual actions are. It is one thing to apply a generic blanket of blame; it is another to find what actually causes poverty, and how poverty is perceived by differing classes of American citizens.

This thesis seeks to understand not only how we, as the American people, view poverty, but how such a viewpoint impacts political discussion and political application of policies. Following the model of Dana Cloud, and her work on <Family Values>, I will argue that poverty is an ideograph. This paper understands an ideograph to be a commonplace term in the political discourse that normalizes the masses to a political myth. Treating poverty as an ideograph, I will look the Johnson Administration's "War on Poverty" as the key moment in the American political history in relation to the poor. The role of this thesis will be to analyze the narratives surrounding poverty that were created by Johnson and look to their consequences in the current political climate. In chapter three I argue that the narrative of Johnson locating the fact of poverty in the lack

of opportunity is used by the Obama Administration today in order to support and replicate the same programs and types of programs. What I fear from this is that when the progressive voice is located in a failed policy which reentrenches the causes of poverty, we have lost the key moment at which to finally arrive at a legitimate war on poverty, one which is run by the poor for the betterment of the poor. Finally, in the fourth chapter, this thesis looks to the role of the varying political agents in relation to the fact of poverty, and seeks to identify the normative vision to addressing the structural harms of poverty.

The following sections in this chapter seek to argue that poverty is an ideograph, justify this application of the project of ideographical criticism, and finally, address some of the theoretical lenses that will be employed by that criticism. Before I begin that process, this paper will first present a brief history of State interactions with the poor, in an effort to create the necessary backdrop for our discussions.

#### A Brief History of State Relations to Poverty

Poverty is not a new human experience. To be poor carries a connotation of lacking, or of need. The poor are understood as those who cannot provide for themselves, or that have fallen on hard luck. What has changed is the way that the citizens of the United States have perceived to be government's role in relation to the poor. The battles about big government and small government can be boiled down to how we, as the citizens of the United States, see the role of our government. The poor are just one battle ground, as with a smaller government comes less social services, and

with a large, more. It is this relationship that I analyze over the course of this document: how much aid is justified for the State to provide. At what point does the nation state have some ethical duty to take care of its citizens, and at what times were the poor left to fend for themselves? These are two distinct narratives that have been constructed over the historical relationship between the State and the Have-nots. In this section I wish to sketch a history of these two narratives, and offer a historical relationship for the ideographical critique.

According to Robert Asen, the first references of formal aid to impoverished communities occurs somewhere in the 1560s-1640s. At this time England was transferring from a feudal economy to a capitalist market for exchanging goods.<sup>2</sup> The feudal structure required the labor of the masses in order to meet the needs of the lord, or owner of the land. In return for a majority of crops grown, the lord would provide security and protection to the farmer and their families. While the situation was not ideal, reliance on a central support for nutrition and protection allowed for a static relationship to wealth. In other words, this functional relationship provided a safety net through the lens of personal security.

The emergence of the market, somewhere between 1500 and 1600 AD, allowed for personal autonomy, and the chance to escape the slavery of the feudal society. It was during this time period that individuals were allowed to provide for themselves through work that they controlled. There was little risk or business opportunities to be had as a serf on the fields of the local lord. Wealth becomes valuable as an individual commodity,

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<sup>2</sup> Asen, Robert. *Visions of Poverty: Welfare Policy and Political Imagination*. East Lansing: Michigan State UP, 2002. Print. Pg 27

as the market is formed, and individuals can access the market on their own.<sup>3</sup> You can then choose what goods to buy, and what goods to sell. You become your own lord, and control your own activities within the market.

This market freedom also allows for the creation of the poor. A serf's lifestyle on the manor was impoverished, as the serf may lack some basic needs, but this relationship was socially normalized. The rich were rich because of last name as opposed to effort or business success. The state of being that you found yourself in was due to familial progression and ways that you were to be socially mobile was to be born into a family with a powerful last name. Under a market based economy these powerful names still existed, but the poor could also move based on their own volition and effort. This means that the poor of the manor and the poor of the market are substantially different. On the manor to be poor was to be normal, as only the lord of the manor was not poor. There were two distinct classes, the haves and have-nots. Within the market the poor are those who lacked the skills necessary to adapt to the market's pressures, or those that had fallen on bad luck, without the manor to protect them. Therefore in the early market economy the poor are those who lacked basic needs due to their own inability to compete. (Perhaps not much has changed?)

Post-feudal England saw a large population increase, straining what little resources existed. The population of the English Isles grew from two million in 1520 to

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<sup>3</sup> ibid

around four million in 1600.<sup>4</sup> According to Marjorie McIntosh, the implementation of the new market based economy was slow to diversify resulting in many heads of households lacking steady employment<sup>5</sup>. Many of the jobs were focused around cotton exports, and with a fluctuating global market these jobs followed early boom and bust cycles, making them temporary at best. Other factors, from famine and inflation also pushed many of the Isle's citizens into states of poverty.<sup>6</sup>

This prompted the passage and implementation of the "Elizabethan Poor Laws" which placed a local "poor tax" in effect for supporting poor relief and legal systems to regulate the earliest version of the social safety net<sup>7</sup>. These programs included the building and funding of halfway houses and community shelters that provided services similar to the modern day food pantry<sup>8</sup>. For McIntosh this paradigm change in how we viewed the different classes of the poor was due to strong religious authority, and the Church's influence over the basic governing structures<sup>9</sup>. The Protestant reformation created the momentum to place poverty on the individual and remove these other factors that were beyond one's control<sup>10</sup>. This created the backdrop for the emergence of poverty relations during the Stuart-Tudor dynasties. During this time period the Protestant Reformation pushed many Catholic charities out of business, and public

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<sup>4</sup> McIntosh, Marjorie K. "Poverty, Charity, And Coercion In Elizabethan England." *Journal Of Interdisciplinary History* 35.3 (2005): 457-479. Academic Search Premier. Web. 21 Oct. 2012. 460

<sup>5</sup> McIntosh, Marjorie K. "Poverty, Charity, And Coercion In Elizabethan England." *Journal Of Interdisciplinary History* 35.3 (2005): 457-479. Academic Search Premier. Web. 21 Oct. 2012. 461

<sup>6</sup> *ibid*

<sup>7</sup> *ibid*

<sup>8</sup> *ibid*

<sup>9</sup> *ibid*

<sup>10</sup> *ibid*

sources of assistance were eliminated<sup>11</sup>. Religion became a way to justify the suffering of the poor, and to ultimately convince the masses that their suffering was for the “greater good”. As an example McIntosh points to rising food prices in 1596, and orders of the Privy Council for sermons to focus on fasting as prayer and religious duty<sup>12</sup>. The implementation of the Elizabethan Poor Law of 1598 was, according to McIntosh, a return to some public ethic of responsibility, and the beginning of an era where some State support for the poor existed.

Robert Asen provides four standards for how this public assistance was applied in this time period. The first is that the public assumed responsibility for the truly needy poor, and society acted as an overseer<sup>13</sup>. This allowed for not only “poor taxes”, but the creation of poor houses to rehabilitate the poor<sup>14</sup>. The second was that these services were financed by the local payments even though national level politics mandated the services<sup>15</sup>. In this way local communities were responsible for their own poor, and the poor were kept local, to be in service to the community. The third was that local officials would deny aid to the poor who had relatives who would support them in a time of crisis<sup>16</sup>. So while public aid relief existed, it was only for those who could not find assistance in any other way. The fourth and final of Asen’s standards regards forced work by the poor. The public overseers required the able poor to work for local artisans and farmers, and later to move to the New World to assist in colonization<sup>17</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup>ibid

<sup>12</sup> ibid

<sup>13</sup> Asen, Robert. *Visions of Poverty: Welfare Policy and Political Imagination*. East Lansing: Michigan State UP, 2002. Print. 28

<sup>14</sup> Asen, Robert. *Visions of Poverty: Welfare Policy and Political Imagination*. East Lansing: Michigan State UP, 2002. Print.29

<sup>15</sup> Asen, Robert. *Visions of Poverty: Welfare Policy and Political Imagination*. East Lansing: Michigan State UP, 2002. Print.28

<sup>16</sup> ibid

<sup>17</sup> ibid

In this era we can see both an ethic of public and private responsibility; while the State would provide assistance, it was only for those who could not work, or had no familial support. Applying McIntosh's analysis, the support for such policies were deeply impacted by one's religious preferences, and therefore the religious preferences of the ruling elite. The narrative of public assistance was shaped by a belief for Catholics that alms were morally good and was pragmatic for entering the kingdom of heaven<sup>18</sup>. Protestants held that assistance by the State for the poor created a cycle of dependence that removed personal motivation<sup>19</sup>. Groups like the Puritans moved to a narrower definition of the "needy" poor, and moved to remove many from the list of public aid. It is interesting to note, yet not to jump ahead too far, that these are similar arguments that return in the Republican's move to reduce the welfare rolls in the 1980s.

The next major shift that we can see is the introduction of the "Gospel of Wealth" by American businessmen in the Gilded Age. This period linked the philosophical works of Herbert Spencer, who argued for social Darwinism and the capitalist successes of men such as Andrew Carnegie.<sup>20</sup> Poverty, during this time period, seems to be a condition based on inherent flaws in the individual or that poverty exists because some human beings are born less capable for success.<sup>21</sup> Carnegie argues that the rich man exhibited a natural superiority over the poor, and society should reflect and benefit from such character flaws.<sup>22</sup> Another assumption was that while charity was "money spent

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<sup>18</sup> McIntosh, Marjorie K. "Poverty, Charity, And Coercion In Elizabethan England." *Journal Of Interdisciplinary History* 35.3 (2005): 457-479. Academic Search Premier. Web. 21 Oct. 2012. 461

<sup>19</sup> *ibid*

<sup>20</sup> Asen, Robert. *Visions of Poverty: Welfare Policy and Political Imagination*. East Lansing: Michigan State UP, 2002. Print. 31

<sup>21</sup> *ibid*

<sup>22</sup> *ibid*

poorly” it offered the best alternative to the lives of the impoverished, and therefore philanthropy was preferred to State aid and assistance.<sup>23</sup> The philosophy of the Gospel of Wealth encouraged noninterference in the market by the State unless it was to defend property rights.<sup>24</sup> As Asen argues, for the followers of the Gospel of Wealth, “government, seen as a usurper of judgment, could not make discriminating decisions”.<sup>25</sup> Therefore any public assistance programs harmed the rich by justifying governmental intrusion in the market. Another thought that existed at this time came from Richard L. Dugale’s study of the poor as he argued that, “pauperism in adult age...indicates a hereditary tendency which may or may not be modified by the environment”.<sup>26</sup> If we argued that early capitalist societies espoused both a public and private ethic of responsibility, this shift argues exclusively for the private. Poverty is understood as a genetic fault, and the social Darwinists argued against public spending on inferior human beings.

The final historical paradigm I wish to examine is the period known as the “New Deal” dating from 1933-1941. This period has a particularly large impact on the modern American discourse of poverty due to its unprecedented expansion of the State’s role and power in the attempt to combat the Great Depression. Newman and Jacobs offer a unique argument for public support of FDR’s policies during the New Deal. In their article “My Brothers’ Keeper?” they argue that contrary to modern belief, the relief programs ushered

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<sup>23</sup> Asen, Robert. *Visions of Poverty: Welfare Policy and Political Imagination*. East Lansing: Michigan State UP, 2002. Print. 32

<sup>24</sup> *ibid*

<sup>25</sup> Asen, Robert. *Visions of Poverty: Welfare Policy and Political Imagination*. East Lansing: Michigan State UP, 2002. Print. 33

<sup>26</sup> Asen, Robert. *Visions of Poverty: Welfare Policy and Political Imagination*. East Lansing: Michigan State UP, 2002. Print. 34



in by FDR were met with suspicion and objections by the country's voters.<sup>27</sup> Many citizens held that government ought not meddle in the affairs of the market, and often were quick to apply the label of socialism to the policies.<sup>28</sup> Another interesting development was the redefinition of the "needy" poor. Much like the earlier eras, the public had a clear conception of who deserved federal support and who did not. For Newman and Jacobs, the non-needy were understood as non-citizens and women.<sup>29</sup> Therefore, those who ought to receive some support, or who ought to be labeled as the needy "poor", were American citizens and male heads of households.

What I feel is important from this time period is the ability for FDR to pass these acts even with such political backlash and disapproval. In relation to the construction of narratives to gain support for a particular policy, FDR was able to sway enough voters to accept his vision of the "New Deal" and gain its long term support. This new paradigm, according to Newman and Jacobs, "translated into a new definition of public responsibility for the consequences of market failures"<sup>30</sup>. Not only is this a dramatic shift from the Carnegie "Gospel of Wealth", but also the near historical precedent that will play a large role the next chapters. Over the course of this section we have seen the debate move from the State's relationship to the poor, to a debate over the State's relationship to the market. This will be key as we move forward into the ideographic criticism of this thesis.

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<sup>27</sup> Newman, K & Jacobs, E 2007. "Brother's Keepers?", *Society*, 44,5, pp. 6-11, Academic Search Premier, EBSCOhost viewed 21 October, 2012. 7

<sup>28</sup> *ibid*

<sup>29</sup> Newman, K & Jacobs, E 2007. "Brother's Keepers?", *Society*, 44,5, pp. 6-11, Academic Search Premier, EBSCOhost viewed 21 October, 2012. 9

<sup>30</sup> Newman, K & Jacobs, E 2007. "Brother's Keepers?", *Society*, 44,5, pp. 6-11, Academic Search Premier, EBSCOhost viewed 21 October, 2012. 10

### On the Ideograph

To begin an examination of poverty as an ideograph it is necessary to first define the “ideograph”. Michael Calvin McGee proposes the definition of the ideograph in his essay “‘The Ideograph’: A Link Between Rhetoric and Ideology”. This article not only highlights the origin of ideographic criticism, but also creates a paradigm shift in the way in which functional terms are associated with the functioning ideologies of the time. Therefore, before we arrive at the idea of the ideograph it seems necessary to understand what McGee is referring to by “ideology”. Drawing upon the Marxist tradition McGee argues that, “Marx’s thesis suggests that ideology determines mass belief and thus restricts the free emergence of political opinion”.<sup>31</sup> In other words only those political opinions that are accepted by the dominant ideology are those that will be given a seat at the table, or a spot in the public discussion. This means that only those beliefs which are supported by this dominant ideology will emerge in the discussion of the populous, and only those beliefs that have ideological backing will be disseminated.

For McGee social norms, or socially accepted truths, can be uncovered in the relationship between the speaker and audience. In his article “In Search of ‘the People’”, McGee argues that “a people” is a fiction dreamed by an advocate and infused with an artificial, rhetorical reality by an agreement of an audience to participate in a collective fantasy”.<sup>32</sup> This “people” is a figment of this collective fantasy that provides meaning for our background individuality in relation to the larger collective. For McGee, the

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<sup>31</sup> McGee, Michael Calvin. “The ‘Ideograph’: A Link Between Rhetoric and Ideology.” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 66, no. 1 (February 1980): 5

<sup>32</sup> McGee, Michael Calvin. “In Search of ‘The People’: A Rhetorical Alternative.” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 61 (1975): 243

collective gain this perception of themselves as a people not through a description of reality, but a political myth that explains that reality. We could also label this as an ideology. An ideology is no more real than the “people” as it would cease to exist if no individual assented to its belief. This political myth is a means at uncovering, or creating a perception of the world around us.

Returning to the idea of “mass belief”, McGee argues that this assent to a political myth also begins the process of undermining other such beliefs and ideologies. If we have bought into a political myth, then all others must be flawed, as they are not our own. The Fascist is as sure that her perception is correct as she is that the Communist is wrong. Therefore, the creation of a “people” also creates this antagonistic perception of the other, or a lens through which to view the other. Taking the relationship to poverty, a people that hold persons who live in poverty as lazy are creating the narrative of the “lazy poor”. The poor are now perceived through the lens of the collective, and the poor are tied to the interpretation of themselves by this dominant ideology. Therefore the creation of a collective’s relationship to the political myth offers a means to understanding the individuals who make up this collective, and a means for the collective to pass judgment or create meaning to those outside of the “people”.

McGee argues that “ideology is transcendent”, or that ideology is able to form both the wielder of power, and those who are subjected to this power<sup>33</sup>. For McGee, a dominant ideology is a belief, or worldview, that influences all agents within a community, and therefore provides the framework within which to judge actions or

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<sup>33</sup> McGee, Michael Calvin. “The ‘Ideograph’: A Link Between Rhetoric and Ideology.” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 66, no. 1 (February 1980): 5

policies. Those who live within this narrative are given meaning by their relationship with the narrative, and those outside are given meaning by their active rejection of this same narrative. To accept the political truths of a narrative seeks to define a personal worldview, and the narrative becomes a means by which we find truth in our relationship to our community, and the peoples who make up this community.

Maurice Charland offers an illustration of this phenomenon in his article “Constitutive Rhetoric: The Case for the *Peuple Québécois*”. This argument focuses on the creation of the political myth of the Québécois. According to Charland this label of Québécois lacks any historical root, or even any historical circulation<sup>34</sup>. In 1979 the *Parti Québécois* released what is known as the “White Papers”, or a document calling for the sovereignty of Quebec, and therefore the autonomy of the people Québécois<sup>35</sup>. For Charland this creation of a people is key, especially when referring back to McGee’s belief of the people and the political myth. The People Québécois are created through their relationship to a constructed historical narrative of the White Papers, and the community Québécois accepts this narrative in relation to an ill-defined normative goal of independence and autonomy. The people are rhetorically constructed, and the acceptance of this construction provides meaning to the narrative. Now those who consider themselves Québécois are placed in tension with the historical narrative of what it means to be a “Canadian” and creates different groups of people in relation to a single political narrative and political myth. Therefore ideology allows for an understanding, or unpacking of the surrounding world, but through the lens of the dominant ideology. As

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<sup>34</sup> Charland, Maurice. CONSTITUTIVE RHETORIC: THE CASE OF THE PEUPLE QUÉBÉCOIS. *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, Vol. 73, No. 2. (19870501) 134

<sup>35</sup> *ibid* 135

David Zarefsky writes, “Truth may be ‘given’, but reality is socially constructed”<sup>36</sup>. The reality of the people Quebecois was constructed by the Parti Quebecois and their dissemination of the White Papers. This truth is given to the Canadians of the region, and by interacting with this belief their reality was altered, or formed.

Therefore ideology frames the debate about what is truth, and at the same time allows for the creation, or the perception of reality. This means that, for the argument’s sake, if Fascism was the dominant ideology, the beliefs of the Communist will not be able to emerge in the public discourse, or will do so in a way that the voice will never be legitimated. Our assent to a political myth cannot only poison us to a perception of reality, but also to other views on that same reality. The myth becomes the reality, and therefore creates a barrier to the liberated self. In this way we must begin to ask a question in relation to the fact of freedom in relation to the fact of poverty. If we are inherently constituted by the political myths that govern the actions and relationships that exist within our “people” when then are we free to form our own opinion or voice?

Taking this perception of ideology McGee argues that, “human beings are ‘conditioned’, not directly to a belief and behavior, but to a vocabulary of concepts that function as guides, warrants, reasons, and excuses for behavior and belief”<sup>37</sup>. This means that for McGee we do not directly assent to the dominant ideology, but are normalized to its beliefs by our connection with its language and symbols. We come to know an

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<sup>36</sup> Zarefsky, David. *President Johnson's War on Poverty: Rhetoric and History*. University, Ala.: University of Alabama, 1986. Print.2

<sup>37</sup> McGee, Michael Calvin. “The ‘Ideograph’: A Link Between Rhetoric and Ideology.” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 66, no. 1 (February 1980):

ideology by stories that we are told, and the interactions that we have with these same narratives.

Taking capitalism as our example ideology, we justify the expansion of the market based on its reference to other definable beliefs, say liberty and fairness. Capitalism exists because, according to the capitalist, it offers the fairest distribution of goods due to the functioning of the market. Therefore, how we defend the ideological imperative of capitalism is by referencing its relations to other beliefs held within the community. The political myth of capitalism is maintained not only by our own direct interaction with the market, but by other narratives that have shaped our own view.

The story of your great-grandfather's journey to America when he opened his small business, was successful, and lived the "American Dream" will assist in your own image of capitalism. From this example capitalism is a way for a man to work hard, and provide for his family, and achieve happiness. It rewards self-sacrifice, and punishes laziness. It is not just these historical narratives that shape our relationship to ideology, but also our personal narratives. My success or failure in the market would seem to provide me with a different understanding of capitalism. I then tell my story which passes the idea and the belief down the line. These are the ways that we connect with the political myth of capitalism, through stories of its benefits and the rewards that it offers. We do not learn the dictionary definition of capitalism, but when our stories are full of capital language, the TV shows we watch, and books we read all contain these same stories, we become normalized to the experience, not the idea.

This example also shows what McGee means by the restriction of political opinion. Following this story how is one to argue against capitalism? All Americans, or those who has assented to the myth of Americanism, will tell this same story even if our great-grandfather was not on that boat. Even if it is not this story from a personal level, at the moment we are familiar with the story of the immigrant we are moved in a way that connects us to the myth of capitalism. Narratives that are appealing will be internalized, and by effect become part of our own story. This is why to be “anti-capitalism” has become anti-American in the modern discourse. The narrative of “capitalism” has become interwoven with the narrative of “American”. This is apparent in the American response to the emergence of a radical politic in areas beyond the influence of the American superstructure.

As Alain Badiou argues in his book The Rebirth of History, the modern American conceptualization of “capitalism” is tied to an understanding of “a capitalism whose Subject is in a way the same as that of the latent communism which supports its paradoxical existence”.<sup>38</sup> As capitalism has moved and changed, the remaining tenant is a defense against the communist revolution. Badiou is arguing that instead of a debate between the ideologies of capitalism and communism, the functioning elite of free enterprise have been able to bolster the defense of capitalism by appealing to a fear of the other. The functioning definition and appearance of capitalism has been altered to accept the same subject, the working class, as that which drives its opposition.

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<sup>38</sup> Badiou, Alain. *The Rebirth of History: Themes of Riots and Uprisings*. London: Verso, 2012. Print.10

From this we see a connection with McGee's work as instead of challenging the ideology of communism, capitalism instead attempts to exist within the same ground, even if such is the primary means by which opponents draw strength. In this way the functioning definition of the market economy can alter and change, even if the actual market itself remains the same. This means that while the market has not been altered the narrative that creates an understanding of the effectiveness and morality of the market can change to appeal to a new base or to respond to a new opposition. In this way, the functioning definition of a "capitalist" changes with the need to preserve the dominant paradigm.

Returning to the ideograph, McGee provides a more formal definition of his idea at the conclusion of his works. He argues that:

"An ideograph is an ordinary-language term found in political discourse. It is a high-order abstraction representing collective commitment to a particular but equivocal and ill-defined normative goal. It warrants the use of power, excuses behavior, and belief that might otherwise be perceived as eccentric, or antisocial and guides behavior and belief into channels easily recognized by a community as acceptable and laudable<sup>39</sup>.

This formal definition is McGee's attempt to provide the critic with the central ideas behind the ideograph and promote the key attributes. I will isolate four of McGee standards and apply them to my project to argue that poverty is an ideograph. I argue for the everyday nature of the ideograph, that the definition of the ideograph justifies the application and/or usage of power, it represents a collective commitment to a normative goal, and internalization of the definition is key to belong to community.

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<sup>39</sup> McGee, Michael Calvin. "The 'Ideograph': A Link Between Rhetoric and Ideology." *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 66, no. 1 (February 1980): 15



The first and seemingly most important aspect of the ideograph is the fact that the term itself functions in everyday normal discourse. This is important to note as if a term held specific meaning only in the closed meetings in the Oval Office McGee would lack the ability to argue for a political myth that is assented to by the populous. This means that not only must we internalize the inherent meaning of a term, but we also must disseminate this through the traditional means of conversation. The reason a term like poverty can have benign meaning is the very fact that when we use the term we imply a larger narrative history without meaning to do so. The term “poverty” advocates the evolved meaning of the term in relation to the previous section’s analysis on the changing relationship between the State and the poor. We may not even be aware of the Elizabethan Poor Taxes, but the current way that we engage with the poor is through a process built upon these actions and their functional meaning.

McGee calls these the “fragments” of the political discourse.<sup>40</sup> A great example would be the “I Have a Dream” speech delivered by Martin Luther King Jr. If we are to take the term “dream” as our example we see that this concept lacks the political weight that MLK offers. The dream that is offered in front of the Lincoln memorial can only be understood through the overlapping meaning derived from a dialogue on the topics of black liberation movements, slavery, class oppression, and other stories. This means that when MLK implies the dream it is the reflection of the dream that is created through the interaction of these connected but separate narratives.

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<sup>40</sup> *ibid*

This means that the term “poverty” offers a fragmented understand of the State, class, and capitalism.<sup>41</sup> What makes the common place use of an ideographic beneficial to the functioning political myth is that we, the electorate or political base, buy in to the evolution of an idea every time we use the word. “Poverty” becomes a normalized term within the political discourse that implies deeper cultural and social consequences, and we ignore these though our belief that “poverty” can be defined as “x”. The power of the ideograph is that we ignore the fact that it is an ideograph, or a tool of oppressive narratives and rhetorical strategies.

The second tenant of the ideograph is that its usage justifies the use or application of power. Poverty seems to meet this standard, as the ways in which we perceive poverty has an impact on the level of support we are willing to provide to a community that is labeled as “impoverished”. Returning again to O’Reilly, it seem that if we are define poverty as a self-inflicted wound, then we are no longer justifying the usage of state power to intervene on behalf of these communities. Or, as Robert Asen argues in his text Visions of Poverty, when we blame the instances of poverty on the individual we justify the increased actions of the State to intervene and shape the individual in a way that makes them a better person.<sup>42</sup> This means that defining poverty as a privately caused harm can justify both increased and decreased State intervention. Therefore, the application of the term “poverty” incites both increased application of power, or less, seemingly meeting the standard as set by McGee.

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<sup>42</sup> Asen, Robert. *Visions of Poverty: Welfare Policy and Political Imagination*. East Lansing: Michigan State UP, 2002. Print. 139

Justification of State power also implies that we, as citizens, give up some of our own power in relation to an ideology. We accept certain actions of our government if they fall within the scope of our worldview. Republicans are willing to provide control over privacy rights to the government's Patriot Act, as it provided us with safety and security. Democrats are willing to accept tax increases to pay for social services. If a policy falls within our political allegiance, or the political myth that we have created, we are less willing to challenge actions by the State, even if that policy apparently takes away our own liberties. It would then seem that to have a perception of the country's poor also requires a larger political and economic framework. This framework, call it conservatism or liberalism, justifies the use of the power in order to apply coercive policies from the State or limits the scope of power in rolling back these policies. A belief that the poor are items of moral concern, and their care is a duty of the federal government requires an ideology that justifies the use of state power in order to implement social programs and taxes to raise the funds. It would seem that a conservative who viewed the poor as units of their own moral concern, and their treatment not a duty of the federal government, would seek to the limit the power to raise taxes and implement these policies.

This analysis on the ideograph also is very closely related with the second standard of the ideograph; that it represents a collective commitment to a normative goal. It would appear that a collective's commitment to a conservative ideology is also a reflection on the power that is justified by the definition of an ideograph. This can also be understood as the functioning of the ideograph reinforcing the dominant ideology's

normative goal, and the acceptance of the ideograph by the populous allows for the ideology's goal to be attained. For this we can again return to McGee's idea of the "people". Here McGee argues that "a kind of rhetoric emerges when masses of persons begin to *respond* to a myth, not only by exhibiting collective behavior, but also by publically ratifying the transaction wherein they give up control of their own individual destinies for the sake of the dream".<sup>43</sup> For McGee, the way that an ideology's normative goal is obtained is how those who have assented to such a belief carry out the goals of the ideologue, and bring about the necessary cultural and social changes. This seems basic enough, but McGee has also offered that the individual will sacrifice her own desires for the ideologue's normative goal.

This means that the functioning of an ideograph not only allows for the ideology to manifest itself in the political discourse, but also holds enough influence that it can shape the actions of the collective and the future of the "people". The American citizen has assented to the political myth of "liberty and freedom", and therefore has signed up for the military in order to make sure that these remain. The soldier is willing to sacrifice her own claim on liberty and freedom because the dominant ideology has convinced her that the goal of liberty and freedom is worth dying for. In this that she has given up her own personal desires for the desires of the ideologue.

What makes McGee's analysis interesting is the phrasing of an "ill-defined normative goal". Under this description, the masses assent without understanding or fully anticipating where this will take them and their actions. As McGee has argued, the

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<sup>43</sup> McGee, Michael Calvin. "In Search of 'The People': A Rhetorical Alternative." Quarterly Journal of Speech 61 (1975): 246

mass collective has legitimated a national narrative, but has not written the end, or can even describe what this end is. The battle takes place in the means to this end, in the way that we describe or engage with the ideographs of our society. It is one thing to support liberty; it is another to understand the logical conclusion of this belief. The political myth comes to hold not only the means to “perceiving” our reality, but also supplies the logic to push back against other ideologies and other beliefs.<sup>44</sup> The perceived good of liberty becomes a way that we are convinced to ignore logical fallacies, or to overlook potential consequences. Our collective reality is therefore defined not only in relation to the dominant ideology, but in the personalization of that worldview. The dominant ideology operates to shape the way that we view our reality, and we are held hostage by the interactions with historical and modern myths or narratives that give meaning to the ideologue. To distance oneself from the political myth is to distance oneself from the collective.

What we can also take from the example of the soldier is the staying power, or pure influence over public opinion that the dominant ideology has. To challenge this soldier’s decision is also to attack all others whom have made the same choice(s). When the ideographs of “liberty and freedom” are also a part of the narrative of Americanism, to address this choice is to place oneself in conflict with this American narrative. These narratives, according to Marx, function to maintain the power of the elite, and to keep the populous at bay.<sup>45</sup> Those who control, or begin to define these ideographs, are those in power. It is the political stump speeches, the afternoon talk radio, and the conversations

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<sup>44</sup> *ibid*

<sup>45</sup> McGee, Michael Calvin. “The ‘Ideograph’: A Link Between Rhetoric and Ideology.” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 66, no. 1 (February 1980): 5

at the bar that normalize us to the functioning of these ideographs. It is these encounters that normalize us, the American people, to actions by this soldier or another. It is the dissemination of a perceived meaning that allows for actions by the elite, and the processes of communication are their means.

The final distinction I wish to make regarding poverty is surrounding the idea that internalization of the definition is necessary to “belong” to a community”.<sup>46</sup> We have already discussed the ways that dominant ideologies can shape a community’s perception of reality, and also how it can alienate non-believers. For McGee this is important as the most basic human reality is the individual, but yet we form groups and collectives.<sup>47</sup> We find meaning through a communal connection and the communal nature constitutes an understanding of the self. This is important for the ideograph as the functioning meaning of a term can vary in different cultures and communities. McGee highlights this in his work surrounding “equality” in the USSR and United States. Both political communities had a cultural understanding of “equality”, but not the same.<sup>48</sup> What makes the difference important is the discord that it creates, as the difference in perceived meaning results in cultural conflict and tension. The Cold War was fought over such differences, and the different perceived meaning in the differing culture. To not accept the Soviet “equality” was to not be a Soviet, or at least to not have bought into the Soviet culture.

This is how an ideograph constructs identity within a culture. Understanding of commonplace terms that hold deep political meaning is necessary to be a functioning

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<sup>46</sup> McGee, Michael Calvin. “The ‘Ideograph’: A Link Between Rhetoric and Ideology.” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 66, no. 1 (February 1980): 15

<sup>47</sup> McGee, Michael Calvin. “In Search of ‘The People’: A Rhetorical Alternative.” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 61 (1975): 245

<sup>48</sup> McGee, Michael Calvin. “The ‘Ideograph’: A Link Between Rhetoric and Ideology.” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 66, no. 1 (February 1980): 8

member of the community. To participate in the American political theater it is key to hold the same tenants of “freedom and equality”. To not hold this shared meaning is to be separated, a ship passing in the night, a separate actor who cannot connect with the historical undertones to a culture’s actions and beliefs.

It is also key to note that multiple interpretations or functioning meanings can operate within a specific culture. Taking the political angle, Democrats and Republicans may have different interpretations of a word such as “socialism”, but can still exist within the same community. It is important to clarify that differences about implementation of policies do not mean that both parties are not operating within a dominant interpretation of the ideograph. Political leaders can differ on their policies in regards to “liberty” and yet still define liberty in the same way. Dominant ideologies and dominant interpretations are the means by which a given policy or action of the State can be accepted by a large percentage of the population, and face little backlash or objection. When a large percentage of the population can reach a common agreement on these terms, actions become normalized in relation to the ideograph’s meaning. Dominant ideologies help explain how large scale changes in the State’s role have been implemented, and why the electorate stood in support of these changes. Dominant ideologies become a tool of power when they are able to convince the citizens of a nation what is in their best interest, and then motivates them to action.

It would also appear that the definition of poverty allows for a sense of belonging to a community, whether that be an economic class or a political creed. The previous reasons as to why poverty is an ideograph also seem to hold here; to define poverty with

the collective would mean to belong to that community. To describe similar narratives regarding the families in poverty means to belong to a community where these same narratives exist. To belong to a community is then to be shaped by the ways that ideographs are used to implement this larger ideological or normative goal. It would also seem that to define poverty in a specific way would be to move oneself further away from being defined as impoverished. To argue that to be in poverty is to have lacked the ability to compete in the market makes your own successes carry significance, as because of your accomplishments you are not poor. On the other hand to argue that poverty is to lack basic needs can force a realization of one's own material shortcoming, meaning that a definition of poverty actually encompasses your own experience. Whatever is the case, it appears to me that poverty is an ideograph in that it justifies or restricts the use of power, creates the incentive and motivation to achieve a normative goal, and acceptance of a definition allows for a belonging to a community.

Ideographs are therefore the terms, and their relative applications, that allow for the dissemination of an ideology to the populous. Ideographs are terms that are perceived to have set understanding within a culture, and operate due to the perception that all share this same characterization of the ideograph.<sup>49</sup> Taking "equality" as our example again, the perception of "equality" being defined differently between the USA and USSR can be interpreted to argue that both communities hold different normalized understandings of the term "equality". This allows McGee to argue that ideographs allow for the

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<sup>49</sup> McGee, Michael Calvin. "The 'Ideograph': A Link Between Rhetoric and Ideology." *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 66, no. 1 (February 1980): 7



implementation of a “rhetoric of control”, or the application of the dominant ideology.<sup>50</sup>

Much like our earlier discussion of how ideology deciphers what is true for the community, the meaning of the ideograph cannot be challenged by individuals within the community<sup>51</sup>. If you challenge what is meant by “equality” the community will return the favor and label you as a communist (itself a functioning ideograph).

### Ideographical Criticism as Critical Analysis

The next question I wish to ask is what is the goal of ideographical criticism, or what is the goal of a project that engages with the ideograph? For McGee the ideograph is a means by which to engage and understand how “language gets in the way of thinking”.<sup>52</sup> The project of the ideographic critic is to separate oneself from the community’s perception of the ideograph, and attempt to argue what the term ought to mean, separated from the influence on the dominant ideology.<sup>53</sup> McGee is adamant in arguing that “ideographs cannot be used to establish or test truth”, but rather can be used to understand the influences of the dominant ideology on the populous, or in the framing of the collective’s normative goal (McGee 9). In relation to this project McGee would ask, “how does the dominant ideology’s perception of poverty impact the community’s perception of impoverished peoples and the State’s policies.” This focus would allow the ideographical critic to escape from the false consciousness that is created by the application, and integration of the ideograph. Therefore the ideographical critic removes

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<sup>50</sup> ibid 6

<sup>51</sup> McGee, Michael Calvin. “The ‘Ideograph’: A Link Between Rhetoric and Ideology.” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 66, no. 1 (February 1980): 7

<sup>52</sup> Ibid 9

<sup>53</sup> Ibid 9

oneself from the community in order to understand the influence of discourse on the community.

There is no uniform method by which ideographical criticism ought to take place. There exist two “schools” of thought in how this process is to be carried out, and what the goals of the critic ought to be. The first of these schools, and the process that will be taken by this thesis, is that of McGee and his student Dana Cloud. Cloud and McGee argue that rhetoric is a tool of oppression and the way that we rhetorically create “people” can have harmful consequences for these communities. Cloud and McGee appear to place an ethical demand on the critic; to understand and address the existing political myths that function within a community. As Cloud argues in her article “The Rhetoric of <Family Values>”, “it is incumbent upon the critic to question the issues motivating ideographic choices, as well as to assess potential consequences of public adherence to a particular category of motives”.<sup>54</sup> This implies that to conduct ideographical criticism the critic must be willing to engage and potentially challenge the cultural assumptions that allow for the ideograph to normalize beliefs. For Cloud and McGee, the ideograph offers a point at which to challenge the dominant ideologies, but also to unpack the political myths that allow for this domination. Due to this Cloud’s work has tended to focus on snap-shots of American rhetorical history, and will single out specific times when dominant ideologies have existed.

The second school of ideographical criticism is that of Celeste Michelle Condit and John Lucaites. This school, best viewed in Condit and Lucaites’s book Crafting

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<sup>54</sup> Dana Cloud, "The Rhetoric of Family Values: Scapegoating, Utopia, and the Privatization of Social Responsibility." *Western Journal of Communication* 62 (1998): 389

Equality, focuses on the rhetorical history of ideographs, and seeks to address how meanings of ideographs have changed over time. The difference, for Condit and Lucaites, is the belief that rhetoric is not an isolatable or determining cause of political and social change.<sup>55</sup> This school then holds that while ideographs are a means of normalizing ideologies for a people, they cannot be addressed as the cause of political actions and policies. This handcuffs the critic from the examination that Cloud and McGee demand, as to hold that rhetoric is not a substantial factor means to ignore the Marxist framing that McGee offers.

Even if this charge is a bit harsh, it would seem that Condit and Lucaites lose some of McGee's emphasis on the creation of collective consciousness, or at least that this consciousness is oppressive in nature. This school moves away from the examination of the more sinister social construction that Marx urges. Condit and Lucaites distance themselves from the belief that rhetoric is controlled by the dominant voices in the community, or that rhetoric is another step in the oppression of the working class. While I accept this charge, I must also maintain that powerful figures can use the narratives that we create to shape and nudge us in the direction of specific policies or ideas. The more we hear a narrative, and the more fine-tuned it becomes, the more likely it is that we agree with and accept part of this argument.

This thesis will operate on the belief that rhetoric, and therefore ideographs, normalize us, as political agents, to policies or actions by the State. To have been constituted by a narrative that argues that African-Americans are individuals of less

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<sup>55</sup> Condit, Celeste Michelle, and John Louis. Lucaites. *Crafting Equality: America's Anglo-African Word*. Chicago: University of Chicago, 1993. Print.xviii

moral concern normalizes a belief in slavery. To be normalized by an anti-Semitic narrative means that a State action like the Holocaust faces little reaction by the people of the narrative. This thesis's focus on poverty will also raise these same ethical questions, as how we feel and how we perceive impoverished communities will normalize us to the treatment that we allow our government to provide. To hold for an example, that all poor families are lazy means support for policies that strip these families of basic means.

I feel that it is also important to look at the ethic of the ideographic critic. It is one thing to argue for the understanding of an ideograph; it is another to trace the real impacts of the ideograph into the political discourse. If there is a narrative that functions to oppress it seems to fall to the critic in order to undo the vehicle of oppression. The critic therefore has to have a mechanism by which to weight the competing claims made by the narrative that seemingly oppresses, and the alternative advocated by the critic. The critic has to challenge the held assumptions of the political myth and ultimately replace it with another that seems to oppress less. This is weird claim to stand by, as we must oppress those who oppress in order to advocate the process of truth-finding. The critic must be aware that they are impacted by an ideograph as well, and the system that they wish to replace the current with is also a result of normalization to a normative vision.

What then must we use to identify which alternative we should approach? For this I wish to look to a work by Slavoj Žižek entitled The Year of Dreaming Dangerously. This text offers analysis on the major world events from the year 2011. These range from the Arab Spring to the bailouts of Greece. Early in the book Žižek

quotes Marx, “no social order is ever destroyed before all the productive forces for which it is sufficient have been developed, and new superior relations of production never replace older ones before the material condition of their existence have matured within the framework of the old society”.<sup>56</sup> What this means to Žižek is that we have no clear solutions for the problems of logic due to the evolution of thought<sup>57</sup>. We can also realize that when Marx argues that the forces of production compete and replace the other so to can the process by which we produce the processes of production. The narrative that McGee critiques is the process by which we are normalized to perceptions of the ideograph, and Marx would offer that not only can we reframe narratives, but they compete and are replaced.

The problem we find with Marx’s account of the competing processes of production is that we believe that each change is an improvement. The quicker and cheaper we can make a product the more efficient we are. As consumers we like lower prices, and as producers we like the profit margins. What remains is the normalization to the narrative of positive capitalism, and we forget that the system that is oppressing still remains, but somehow we have allowed it to get more efficient at oppressing. This seems to be the ethic of the critic to challenge the assumptions of competition and improvements. In reality the role of the ideograph is to make us culpable in our own oppression, and therefore the critic serves to push back against the improvement of the system in favor of the rejection of the system.

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<sup>56</sup> Žižek, Slavoj. *The Year of Dreaming Dangerously*. London: VERSO, 2012. Print. 7

<sup>57</sup> *ibid* 8

This project seeks to examine the implications of the ideograph “poverty” in its functioning to normalize the political myth of capitalism. In addition, I offer a frame of reference for viewing the relationship between the poor and the State through the processes of political action. I look at the Lyndon B. Johnson War on Poverty era in American politics as the prime example of the functioning mass consciousness and the normalization of oppression. The argument that this thesis makes is that to perceive Johnson as a progressive hero for the poor is to fall into the trap set by the ideograph. The War on Poverty is offered as a restoration of the politic of the poor, but it instead creates a new narrative to describe the other, the impoverished. We lose the chance to ask the questions necessary of the system as the narrative creates a view that Johnson benefitted the poor, and therefore showed that the narrative of capitalism could work. Today we see that poverty still exists and due to this new faith in the State to protect the poor the least advantaged in our society are less well off.

In order to analyze the use of the ideograph “poverty” I look to the term’s usage in national newspaper editorials. I analyze the New York Times, the Wall Street Journal, the Chicago Tribune, the Washington Post, and the Los Angeles Times. This offers a reflection of a wide range of political leanings and geographic locations in order to look for the national conception of the poor. I use editorials as this offers a clear reflection of how the political discourse treats the implications of poverty and offers a reflection on how the term’s use impacted or normalized perceptions to a narrative.

## Chapter Two

### *LBJ and the War on Poverty: The State As An Ally*

#### LBJ

Following President Kennedy's assassination in 1963 the political climate in Washington drastically changed. Gone was the likeable President John F. Kennedy, and in stepped the serious, often confrontational Lyndon B. Johnson. As David Zarefsky argues in his book President Johnson's War on Poverty, the American people had strongly denounced political extremism but were not willing to show LBJ the same love as the late JFK<sup>58</sup>. They were willing to accept the legitimacy of the Democratic Party even without their leader, but what LBJ offered was not what the electorate had asked for. Johnson was chosen for the VP not due to his close relationship with Kennedy or even his brilliant political strategy. Rather it was a pragmatic move to help shift the electoral map, and gain some support in the Deep South<sup>59</sup>. Due to this Johnson needed his own policy, one that he could make his own and separate himself from the previous administration. His plan followed a common thread in American politics; nothing fires the American people into action more than a war.

While viewed by many as a pragmatic political move, and Zarefsky seems to agree to a point, the War on Poverty still aroused national support, and eventually was passed into law in the form of various pieces of legislation. While we can debate the

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<sup>58</sup> Zarefsky, David. *President Johnson's War on Poverty: Rhetoric and History*. University, Ala.: University of Alabama, 1986. Print. 22

<sup>59</sup> *ibid* 25

specifics of the effectiveness of these acts, what cannot be debated is the functional shift in the relationship between the State and the poor. Over the next pages I argue that the Johnson's Administration's War on Poverty posited a belief of a public ethic in relation to the poor; a belief that no matter why or how a man or women found themselves in the state of poverty it is the duty of the citizens to correct or at least assist to alleviate the suffering of their fellow countrymen. In order to justify this belief I offer evidence of the national, functioning definition of 'poverty' as a lack of opportunity due to factors that existed beyond the control of the poor. In fact, if this is the case, then the poor are removed of all culpability for their state of affairs, and rather the American system is placed on trial as the creator, and maintainer of the fact of poverty. Gone is the era of FDR and his equality and second bill of rights, and in stepped Johnson with the full force of pragmatism at his back.

I first begin by analyzing the State of the Union in which President Johnson announces the War on Poverty. I then move to the nation's reaction to such a characterization of the poor, and the cause of their suffering. To do this I address three major thematic areas. The first is the functional definition that to be poor is to lack the opportunity to pursue the "American Dream". The second is the belief that the poor are victims due to their state of affairs, and that their location within this system is the cause of their victimization. And finally I will offer evidence depicting the image of the poor as separate from society, or in other terms, the poor as hidden from society. I argue that the way that the system is structured results in the poor falling through the cracks, and being separated from the rest of the nation.



Remembering what was addressed in the previous chapter, the functioning paradigm of this relationship, enacted by FDR in his New Deal, is a belief that poverty is located in the fact of inequality. As FDR himself stated, “The test of our progress is not whether we add more to the abundance of those who have much; it is whether we provide enough for those who have too little.” We should look to the term “provide” in this statement, as for FDR it was not just the fact of inequality that was inherent to poverty, but rather a failure of the American nation as a whole.

While this might sound similar the difference is that FDR argued for providing for the poor, whereas Johnson argues that we ought to provide an opportunity for the poor. What we see from the era of FDR is, on one hand, the first functioning public ethic that we can argue constitutes the beliefs and JFK and LBJ make real in their actions as the Commander in Chief. The difference lies in the way in which such the ethic was enacted. Both eras oversee the implementation of the social safety net, the invisible level of protection that we offer to our country’s least-advantaged. It is interesting to note that FDR’s passage of the Social Security Act creates a new line for debate within the nation. The issue becomes not a discussion of the poor directly, but rather talk about them through policies. It is not are the poor “poor”, but are the programs that we implement to assist them “poor” as policies. There are not attacks on the poor as persons but rather as beneficiaries of government programs. The “needy poor” are only known to be needy through the fact that their receive a check in the mail from the government, and this makes the invisibility of the poor real through the affective construction of American domestic policies.

In this way it can be argued that FDR starts a paradigm in American politics where entire elections are fought over how it is that we, the American electorate, are asked to dialogue with the competing images of the poor that appear on our car radios and television screens. While we will find debilitating images of the poor, is it not the case from the mouth of the Johnson Administration. From Johnson we see a continuance of an empathy for the poor, and a belief that we need to assist, the ways that they go about the process is what this chapter will examine.

#### Declaration of War

On January 8<sup>th</sup>, 1964 President Lyndon B. Johnson gave his first State of the Union Address to a joint session of Congress. This speech offers the President a chance to capture the highlights of the previous year, but also to address future policies and his proposed direction for the country in the upcoming year. It is in this speech where we first see the formal declaration of a “War on Poverty”, and first signs of the shift from the previous paradigm of the State’s relationship to the poor.

What we can see coming from the words of LBJ is blame at the system in which the poor see themselves a part of the system that FDR has offered. While capitalism existed as a system under FDR, the creation of governmental safety net, through and with the market, creates a functional new system. Johnson argues that,

“Very often the lack of jobs and money is not the cause of poverty, but the symptom. The cause may lie deeper in our failure to give our fellow citizens a fair chance to develop their own capabilities, in a lack of education and training, in

lack of medical care and housing, in a lack of decent communities in which to live and bring up their children”<sup>60</sup>

So while FDR has argued that we ought to assist the poor directly, Johnson is arguing that the reason we ought to assist is due to our culpability in not providing what is necessary for a “fair chance” at a decent life. It is those who have failed to offer that receive the blame, not the poor because they are unemployed or starving. FDR implements the duty, and now it becomes a debate about how best to employ said duty. Due to this, Johnson is able to refer to the poor as “living on the outskirts of hope” and that our role is to “replace their despair with opportunity”.<sup>61</sup> While the outskirts of hope is a rhetorical method of describing the location of poverty, Johnson is also willing to identify these very real locations of poverty. He argues that the State must “pursue” poverty in the:

“city slums and small towns, in sharecropper shacks or in migrant worker camps, on Indian Reservations, among whites as well as Negroes, among the young as well as the aged, in boom towns and in the depressed areas”.<sup>62</sup>

For Johnson the fact of poverty is one that affects all corners of the nation, and the battle is not to be fought in one location, but rather through a national recommitment to offering these opportunities to the poor, the opportunities that citizens have for too long denied the poor. These are very real factors that exist beyond the control of the poor, as they cannot decide when opportunities are offered to them by the affluent citizens. The reason for poverty is then grounded in this systematic lack of opportunity. Even looking

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<sup>60</sup> "President Lyndon B. Johnson's Annual Message to the Congress on the State of the Union January 8, 1964 [ As Delivered in Person before a Joint Session ]." *President Lyndon B. Johnson's Annual Message to the Congress on the State of the Union January 8, 1964*. N.p., n.d. Web. 13 Dec. 2012.

<sup>61</sup> *ibid*

<sup>62</sup> *ibid*

ahead to the name of the office tasked with fighting the war carries this same emphasis on opportunity. Johnson's Administration urges the creation of the Office of Economic Opportunity to be the general in the fight against poverty.

Johnson also highlights the fact that poverty exists even within the "richest nation on earth", offering that it is due to its prosperity that the nation can combat the enemy of poverty. By declaring war on poverty, Johnson has created the image of poverty as a foreign aggressor, not much different than a speech given by FDR twenty years earlier, declaring war on the foreign aggressor of Japan. Still, Johnson's war is fought against an idea, or a state of being, not a soldier with a gun on the battlefield. Johnson's declaration takes the image of poverty and creates a living idea that can be attacked on the battlefield of the American system.

The "war" metaphor is also interesting for this paper's task as it on one hand offers a rhetorical support for the poor, but also strips the poor of some of their autonomy. To fight a war means to stand up for those who cannot fight for themselves, at least from our vantage point. When the American industrial complex arrives at the scene of a conflict we justify actions in one of two ways. The first is that we believe that our actions, separate from the domestic politics of America, are important for the "defense" or protection of the "American way of life". We see this clearly in the current conflict in Afghanistan. We invade a sovereign state, one that we no longer hold to be a "legitimate" state and implement "democracy" in order to stop the brewing of terror in the mountains. When the news cycle tells us the reason it is couched as the expansion of "liberty" and "freedom", but the real goal is American national defense to stop the next

9/11. This example also allows us to identify the second way we support armed conflict, protection of the world's least advantaged. We, the West, know how you ought to live, and we will stop the other blocking you from this dream.

In relation to poverty we can see both of these narratives functioning in our use of the phrase "war on poverty". On one hand we fight on behalf of the least advantaged in order to protect the country's economic structure, but also because the poor do not fit into what we would argue in the ideal conception of the American citizen. We feel for the poor as they lack the resources and political ability that we, the elite, have "gained and earned". We can feel for the poor, or fight their war for them, because we know such a war does not harm us in any way, but rather is a means by which we can preserve our own place in society.

It is also key to note that the poor have no ability to fight this war on their own, at least in the way that we think politics ought to function. To win a political war in this sense is to create allies within government and the private sector, and to use a combined force to deter the actions of the idea of oppression. When the system is to blame for poverty we have removed ourselves from the culpability of the system that we use daily, and that we benefit from materially every day. As Slavoj Zizek argues in his book The Year of Dreaming Dangerously, the poor have no way by which to represent themselves as political actors as the system that we label as oppressive functions to create division within the class of the poor. He states that "this class of people who cannot represent themselves and thus can only be represented is of course, the class of small holding

peasants.”<sup>63</sup> So then the poor are no different than Afghanis living under the Taliban, at least in the perception of those with the power to act. The United States is able to muster its force in the collation of the willing, the combination of these intergovernmental allies, in order to fight a war for the other, those who due to our own political location are unable to fight the war on their own. It is not that the poor lack any motivation or drive to remove the fact of poverty, rather the war is fought when it is politically pragmatic, when a new president needs to place his mark on history.

We can identify the three reasons that we, the elite with political power, can justify our actions on behalf of the de-universalized class of the poor. The first is that the very system we hold to be oppressive also enables the stripping of the political voice from the poor. When jobs become a finite resource, the market places extra worth to the means by which we as subjects can acquire capital. This means that the poor are always fighting over less jobs than there are people, forcing internal conflict for the right to remove themselves from the label of the poor. The second rationale is the belief that the individual who is poor lacks any political voice of their own. This can either be due to their lack of capital by which to influence politics, or by the fact that being “poor” creates a divide between the State and it’s subjects. This final reason is what this chapter will seek to elaborate on. I argue that we fight a war for the poor as a means of protecting our own domestic security to assent to a structure of market based capitalism and aristocratic democracy.

### The Great Society

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<sup>63</sup> Žižek, Slavoj. *The Year of Dreaming Dangerously*. London: Verso, 2012. Print. 22

Months after making his State of the Union address, while addressing the graduating class of the University of Michigan on May 22, 1964, Johnson urges the graduates to work to create the “Great Society”. He argues that this new world “demands an end to poverty.”<sup>64</sup> This society is a world that “rests on abundance and liberty for all.”<sup>65</sup> Again Johnson is offering a universal paradigm of the relationship between the citizens and State. The State now becomes a means by which to protect this liberty that all citizens strive for. This mirrors the description of the State’s responsibility as articulated in the State of the Union. If to be poor is to lack opportunity, then liberty seems to be means by which to create this opportunity. Johnson is proposing a view that while the State ought to end poverty, it also must do so in a way that pays respect to the individual choices and dreams of the American citizen.

In fact Johnson paints the picture of poverty as the barrier to this liberty when he states that “poverty must not be a bar to learning and learning must offer an escape from poverty”.<sup>66</sup> Education becomes a way that a class of people living in poverty is given the opportunity to remove themselves from their situation, as while the State is offering the opportunity of education, it is the individual citizen that is the agent of change. Johnson offers a path by which individuals can remove themselves from a bad state of affairs, while at the same time preserving their liberty and dignity. What is clear from Johnson’s description of the Great Society is that this society is not a place that USA is currently at, and the utopia becomes the ultimate goal of the War on Poverty. The Great Society is the idealistic image that is used to recruit the soldiers to carry out the battle plan.

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<sup>64</sup> "Lyndon B. Johnson "The Great Society." *Lyndon B. Johnson The Great Society*. N.p., n.d. Web. 21 Apr. 2013.

<sup>65</sup> *ibid*

<sup>66</sup> *ibid*

The Great Society can also be described as the normative goal that McGee argues is the functional goal of the ideograph. Johnson gives us some specifics on ways to get to the society, jobs training programs, increased access to healthcare and education, and ultimately the redistribution of wealth in tax policies, but the end goal is still nothing more than an ideal. Still, the audience is given a meaning to sacrifices that must be made in this ongoing conflict. The University of Michigan graduates are asked to sacrifice their own goals and ambitions in order to “give every citizen an escape from the crushing weight of poverty.”<sup>67</sup> The normative goal that Johnson provides is to lift the poor from their status as victims and rather to offer the opportunity to succeed and become functioning members of the Great American Society.

#### The Culpability of the System

When addressing the system’s culpability in the fact of poverty it is first necessary to define what this “system” is. While it could be argued that the American system is the democratic governing structure and the market economy, these terms by themselves can also shift in functional meaning in relation to the ideograph poverty. To understand the functioning definition of the “system”, at this time period, it is necessary to turn to the ways in which actors within this system describe the relationship. As stated in the Chicago Tribune,

"there is no need to repeat our reasons for believing that the definition of poverty changes with the times, that some people will always be worse off than others, that the alleviation of their condition depends on broad economic forces and monetary and fiscal policies far beyond the reach of any government program",<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> *ibid*

<sup>68</sup> "Pie in the Sky", *Chicago Tribune*



The system is made up of more than just the State, but rather the economic and monetary forces that affect even the functioning of the State. The elimination of poverty means grappling with the economic realities that exist both due to State action, but also those that exist beyond. It is telling when the author also discusses the changing definitions of poverty. Not only does this offer some credibility to the thesis of this paper, but also acknowledges the complex relationship between the State and the poor. We see a description of the reality that poverty will always exist within such a system, but also that this system can control the actions of the State. This seems to hold true when looking to the modern political application of the market and the relationship that this holds with the political myths that function. An incumbent candidate is more likely to be at risk when the economy is slumping or remaining static. This means that the politic of a nation is derived from its very connection to these forces of capital that the author addresses. While this framing is important to keep in mind, I will make a larger argument on the topic later in this thesis in relation to the modern conception of how the agents of change ought to enforce and create the new growth in jobs needed to meet Johnson's plea.

Therefore in this section I wish to look to the discussions that centered around the economic opportunities offered or denied by this system. I first will look to the economic trends, such as automation and unemployment, as factors of this system. The second area I wish to look at is the "cycle of poverty" or institutional factors that create trends within the class of the poor. The third factor of the system I wish to identify is that of the "hidden poor" or the poor are separated from the mainstream of the American society. I

argue that these three are natural byproducts of the “American System”, either in the distribution of resources, or in the way that person are engaged within that system.

### Economics and Prosperity

Beginning with the role of economic trends we look to a written account of the early stages in the War on Poverty as depicted by Washington Post:

“Raising over-all levels of income and employment will doubtless provide exits by those who are now trapped by poverty can escape. But past experience indicates that the unseen pockets of rural poverty, the unemployment in areas who economics have been made obsolete by technological changes and the hordes of poverty-stricken urban dwellers will not automatically vanish as the GNP soars above the \$600 billion level”<sup>69</sup>.

What makes this quote telling for the project at hand is that while written before Johnson’s State of the Union, we can see that the problem of poverty is apparent to the writer. In fact, the writer specifically refers to Johnson’s upcoming announcement in the War on Poverty campaign, meaning that the ideas that will be addressed at the State of Union are already beginning to circulate in the national political discussion. Even more we see the basis for Johnson’s argument that the poor have lost economic opportunities. We learn that the poor have been pushed out of the labor market by factors such as technological automation. Even when facing large economic growth, as depicted by the soaring GNP numbers, poverty still exists in the pockets of America. Workers have been denied opportunities as their job, their means of income, is no longer required in the evolving nature of the capitalist market. The changes in the system have resulted in the lack of opportunity for the poor to escape from poverty.

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<sup>69</sup> “Eliminating Poverty”, *Washington Post*

This passage also focused on the term “exits”, or the means by which an agent, who is poor, can leave behind “rural poverty”. This acknowledges an understanding that in the status quo of this era’s politics the poor are trapped, and the new policies implemented can unlock a door that have been denied or is currently being denied.

We see similar logic coming from later articles published after the State of the Union. As written in the Washington Post:

“If an attack on poverty is to succeed, it must seek to change the whole social environment in which poverty breeds. It must simultaneously focus upon education of the young, manpower retraining, technological changes, the cohesiveness of family life, regional economies and race relations. Action on all these fronts is urgently required”<sup>70</sup>.

Poverty is here said to be a relationship between a larger network of social harms, specifically the constant change of the labor market in the face of rapid change and alteration. Even more apparent is the author’s willingness to treat the fact of poverty as a perpetuating entity by his usage of the term “breeds”. Poverty takes on animalistic characteristics, and becomes the factor of the social environment that one needs to exit.

Even further, as printed in the Wall St. Journal: “As technology has boomed, their share in prosperity has decreased; their participation in recession and misery has increased”<sup>71</sup>. To live in poverty is to be miserable in your real experiences, but this is compounded by the wealth that is earned by the rest of the population. We see then that “poverty” cannot be described on its own, but rather only in reference to the other that has participated in growth, and avoided recession. Poverty takes on the role of describing

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<sup>70</sup> “The Roots of Poverty”, *Washington Post*

<sup>71</sup> “Focus on Poverty”, *The Wall Street Journal*

the others in our society but from the vantage point of the wealthy. Returning to the comments made in the Post regarding the “cohesiveness of family life”, we see a normative vision of the poor functioning in the application of a commonplace term. To be impoverished is to be separated from the ideal of the citizen, or at least the ideal of economic participant. The poor agent is no longer a consumer as they lack the disposable income to justify the purchase of luxury goods. They are not producers as they lack the same capital needed to create or participate in the market. The poor therefore lack access to the market’s prosperity and this lack increases their “misery”.

From these commentaries we learn that a leading cause of poverty is in fact the system of the market, and that as this system continues to rapidly expand, it also is leaving behind those who are unable to re-train themselves or adapt to the market. In fact, the more the economy has grown, the less the poor have been able to share in the growth. Here we see the understanding that Johnson offers of a loss of opportunity, and the failure of the larger American duty to provide such opportunities. The market is then the source of poverty, according to these writings, and while they do not go as far as to blame the persons responsible for such as change, they are willing to hold the country’s economic system up to this standard. These factors cannot be separated from the system as the driving force of the market is for constant innovation to produce products cheaper, and more effectively, even if it means leaving behind some of the workers who make up a part of the market.

This allows us to identify a link between the emphasis on unemployment and the class of the poor. If technology has been a large factor in the creation of the class of the

poor, and its primary role has been to deny the opportunity of employment, the understanding of poverty is directly tied to the fact of holding a job, or receiving income. Technology also seems to be one vehicle by which the market sustains itself. Without technology we lack innovation, and without the political myth of the market's constant rebirth through new ideas we lack a physical connection to the idea of the market. Therefore, if national consensus around technology is that it plays a role in the fact of poverty, it would seem that the national dialogue also holds the system accountable. This remains consistent to what is offered by President Johnson, and shows the continuance of the narrative endorsed by the War on Poverty.

#### Cycle of Poverty

The second area I wish to look at is the so-called "cycle of poverty", or the continuance of economic hardship over multiple generations. While not necessarily tied to the capitalist market, it does represent the idea of a systematic factor in the continuance of such economic hardship. As written in the New York Times:

"And the children of poor families are caught in what has become known as the cycle of poverty- the perpetuation of poverty from generation to another. All too often, these children are unable to overcome their home environments because their schools, too, are below standards."<sup>72</sup>

Here the image of the poor is found in the children of parents who are poor themselves. The writer is showing the connection between being raised in a situation of poverty, and having this fact compounded by the low quality of the schools which the children of the poor attend. The way in which the system is providing education at these schools plays a

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<sup>72</sup> "To Help the Poor", *New York Times*, January 18, 1964

large role in the continuation of the cycle of poverty. To be “caught” implies an outside force that is holding the agent down, or blocking from some means to realization. The image of spider seems to hold well, as the fly caught in the web can only move of act is the web or the spider allows. The poor are only allowed outside the cycle of poverty is the web is broken, through education, or if the spider, the oppressor, allows. It seems that if we hold the elite of the capitalist market to be out spider, this supports the earlier idea that the poor lack the political agency to change the situation on their own, and rather must wait for the oppressor to feel compassionate and save the day.

Continuing, as written in the Los Angeles Times:

“very few grown men and women in our pocket of poverty are any longer able to learn the new skills they need to escape from poverty” ....“there is nothing a child needs to escape from the poverty-pattern, and everything to lock that child into the pattern”<sup>73</sup>.

Here we see a description of a system that lacks the ability to provide opportunities for new schools to those who live in pockets of poverty, very similar to the language of the low standards of education. The system also is said to play a large role in the continuance of the poverty-pattern as no options are offered to allow children to free themselves from this cycle, but rather it does a better job of keeping them poor.

The emphasis on youth in this cycle is also seen in an article by the New York Times:

“An equally basic threat to the success of the drive to assist the hard-core unemployed and to make a real dent in the cycle of inherited poverty is the plan of the Democratic majority in the House Education and Labor Committee to eliminate school

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<sup>73</sup> “Failure of Home to Do Its Job Worst Feature of U.S. Poverty”, *Los Angeles Times*

aid from the Administration's anti-poverty bill. Education is the indispensable element in an any effective assault on poverty"<sup>74</sup>.

And,

“Now, to avoid embroilment in the touchy issue of aid to religious schools, the committee majority has vitiated the most of what little contribution the measure might make to combating illiteracy through the schools. The result will be to condemn thousands of deprived youngsters to scholastic impoverishment and thus to chain them to the poverty that grips their fathers”<sup>75</sup>.

These passages highlight the connection between education and the escape from the state of poverty, or as the author describes the state that has been “inherited”. Much like we see in the market, wealthy families are able to pass along an inheritance to make sure that their children have the opportunity to be the ideal American, and the families of poverty can only pass along their poverty, their only financial identification. The “chains” of poverty ought to awaken the image of slavery or the life of an agent whose every action is tied to the will of the master, the agent that holds the means for political actualization.

The author criticizes the lack of funding that is being associated with education, and specifically describes the impact of politics on education funding. He highlights the issue of funding for religious schools as the barrier to larger educational assistance to the poor of who are living in the cycle of poverty. Due to political factors, such an opportunity to education is being denied. It is here that we can see the linkage between a larger systematic view of the poor, and how the regular functioning of the political system prioritizes political squabbles over, according to this author, *necessary* aid to the poor. The poor are again described as having little control over this political discussion, and thus are subject to political whims that are beyond their own control. The cycle of

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<sup>74</sup> “Rescuing the Poor”, *New York Times*, May 25, 1964

<sup>75</sup> *ibid*

poverty is perpetuated by these larger political needs, and if education is an effective means of lifting the youth from a state of poverty, the political system is directly culpable for the logic of alienation. While most of the analysis in this chapter so far has addressed the economic system's culpability in poverty, this passage allows us to include the political theatre in the larger view of the American system.

We also see references to this cycle of poverty afflicting adults and parents, not just their children. As John Kenneth Galbrith, Professor of Economics at Harvard during this time, writes,

“If the head of a family is stranded deep on the Cumberland Plateau, or if he never went to school, or if has no useful skill, or if his health is broken, or if he has succumbed as a youngster to a slum environment, or if opportunity is denied to him because he is a Negro, then he will be poor and his family will be poor, and that will be true no matter how opulent everyone else becomes”<sup>76</sup>.

For Dr. Galbrith the fact of poverty is tied to an objective understanding of opportunity within the nation. He offers the gauntlet of opportunities denied, both due to larger circulating factors like being born in a slum, but also in facts of life, such as illness or race. Being denied an opportunity due to race is not necessarily tied to economics, as I have argued thus far, but rather is a cause of the structuring of a system that allows for such oppression or discrimination. The term “Negro” implies its own politic, both in the narrative of understanding that surrounds such a term, but also the in the emphasis placed on circulation of this label in relation to the market. The idea of the “poor” now becomes the idea of a “black” man. “He” is located in the slum, and is denied his chance at the market both by his lack of quality resources, but also due to his skin color.

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<sup>76</sup> “Focus on Poverty”, *The Wall Street Journal*



Still, Dr. Galbrith does touch on factors of education and job training that we have already seen as the epicenter of the War on Poverty. It would then seem that Dr. Galbrith agrees with the definition of the poor that circulates from the Administration, that the poor have little control over their own fact of poverty. This passage also highlights the fact that poverty can exist even within a nation of great wealth, as reference to economic structuring of the nation, or the ways in which resources are allocated. If we accept Galbrith's, and Johnson's, premise for the fact of poverty, we remove fault from the poor for their own state and rather shift this culpability back to a nation that can prosper and yet still allow suffering.

These passages also depict the poor as victims of the cycle of poverty. When we argue that the poor have little control over the political and economic processes of the American system, this victimization is a direct result of lack of opportunity to facilitate, or participate in this system. The connection between the system and the victimization of the poor stretches much further than just political squabbles over funding statistics. As we see in these next few passages the poor are not only harmed by their lack of opportunity, but through the fact of their situation as "the poor".

This stresses the next theme of poverty than can be seen functioning in this time, in direct relation to the cycle of poverty. While similar to the logic offered previously about the lack of opportunity, such a stance offers a more nuanced view of the poor class of America. To be denied opportunity does not necessarily mean to become a victim of a system, and therefore continuing in this section I wish to look at the processes by which the poor were made worse off by the system.

We see this argument presented in the Los Angeles Times:

“Poverty in America blights the lives of millions of persons; it relegates them to rural shacks or urban slums, it keeps them unemployed and unemployable; it deprives the aged of comfort and the young of hope”<sup>77</sup>.

The term “relegates” carries with it a sense of removal, or that poverty places persons in a specific location and situation. This passage argues the fact of poverty not only offered in terms of location, but also what impacts and consequences such a reality places on an impoverished agent. The commentary continues by arguing that even the slums continue to “deteriorate”, meaning that poverty is actually getting worse in these urban centers. The fact of poverty also makes the poor unemployable, meaning they lose any chance to re-enter the market, or even to build upon their current economic location.

Even further in an article written discussing the work of Professor John Kaplan, a lecturer at Northwestern University School of Law, the following argument is presented:

"the real problem more and more is not discrimination against the negro because he is a Negro, but discrimination against the poor, of whom the Negro, due to 100 years of segregation, is overly represented."<sup>78</sup>

Here we again see the connection between factors beyond the control of the poor: the fact of birth, and a larger systematic oppression due to such factors. Kaplan argues that the reason for African-American poverty is both tied to the larger cycle of poverty, due to discrimination, and this discrimination not only removes opportunities for advancement but also creates a victim of the subject. Here the cycle of poverty is expanded to not only include being born into a poor household, but also the fact of being

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<sup>77</sup> “Anti-Poverty Program Only a Start Massive Support Needed Poverty War Just a Start”, *Los Angeles Times*

<sup>78</sup> “Calls Poverty Big Factor in Northern Bias”, *Chicago Tribune*

born into a minority household. Discrimination of the African-American is tied to the image of the poor, and especially when the poor are imagined as these minorities, which the system has justified or at least normalized discrimination against. The system's policy of segregation is linked to the current victimization of the poor. What makes this passage even more useful in describing the functioning definition of "poverty" is the fact that this author is challenging a normalized image of the poor. Instead, through the work of Professor Kaplan, the author is highlighting the lack of opportunities in a negative light, therefore challenging the functioning definition of poverty tied to racial inequality. The African-American family is poor not because they are black, but because the system has separated such groups from the opportunities of the system.

We also see descriptions of victimization that are not tied to racial discrimination.

As written in the New York Times:

"The battle for equal educational opportunity has shaken education out of its complacency and has forced educators to stop the 'dreary recital' about poverty-stricken children's handicap 'as an excuse for poor schools and ineffective education.'" <sup>79</sup>

The term "poverty-stricken" is important as it again creates poverty as separate from the experience of the individual. Poverty becomes a descriptor of the state of affairs in which the child finds themselves. This fragment also highlights the fact that poverty was used to provide a reason for lower functioning educational systems. In fact, it seems to be the case that the poor are predicted to be lower performing due to place in society. While the previous articles in this section do support such an assertion, the difference is the role in which the fact of poverty plays. We have seen thus far that areas of low

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<sup>79</sup> "Education Failure Up Front", *New York Times*, February 23, 1964

income tended to underperform on the education front in relation to more affluent communities. So this assertion seems to have some grounding.

Education also seems to offer a unique case study of the view of the poor during this time period, as arguably students have little control over the quality of education that there are receiving. The specific piece I want to focus on is the tension between ideas that education is worse in low-income communities due to the existence of poverty, or is the lack of performance due to the functioning image of the poor. In other words does education suffer due to the inadequacy of the persons who live in poverty, or to a larger systematic that normalizes the poor as underperforming?

We can see the image of the poor in terms of educational access in this article from the Los Angeles Times which addresses the funding of “slum” schools:

“Usually these schools are substandard, and substantially wrong schools for the children of poverty. These students deprived in every other aspect of their lives, require more, not less of educational opportunity if they are to succeed; the most imaginative not the least imaginative of educational efforts. For too many years, however, education in the slums has been directed to the maintenance of schools which exist in form but not in substance-where teachers seem to teach and children seem to attend- but where the link between teaching and learning is frail and tenuous.”<sup>80</sup>

Again we can see a critique of the educational system, or the methods by which children who live in the slums are taught. Specifically we see a connection drawn between the school as a place of learning, and the school as a physical structure. The author also highlights the need for more opportunity for the children of the slums, as opposed to less funding and educational reform. The image of the poor student is once again shown as a child with potential, but as lacking decent structures in which to flourish. The student is

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<sup>80</sup> “Schools of the Slums Could Defeat Poverty”, *Los Angeles Times*

not benefited by the education system, and therefore we can argue that she is a victim of a larger narrative of the role between education in the slums and the potential worth of these students. The student is the victim of an educational system that allots teachers who cannot supply to basic requirement that the education should hold. Since these allocations fall beyond the controllable factors of the student, it again seems that this analysis on education follows the overarching argument for this chapter. Students are denied opportunities by the system, and therefore the system is the source of poverty, much as Johnson has so far argued.

### The Other America

The third theme I wish to look at is the idea of the hidden poor or sometime what is referred to as the “Other America”. To begin this process I wish to look at the concept of rural need, as depicted by the writing of the time. I next move into some discussion on the image of “Appalachia” as the symbol of the other America. Finally I look at the location of poverty in the urban slums, and offer that such a location is treated differently by larger political and economic forces than are the affluent areas in that same city or area.

The understanding of poverty as a structuring of economic forces is not only tied to the abject circumstances of the inner-city, or the slum, but also becomes synonymous with the nation’s connection with the rural poor, specifically farmers. As stated in the

New York Times: “There are too many people engaged in marginal farming, living in bleakness and deprivation, in the midst of plenty.”<sup>81</sup>

And in the Chicago Tribune: “There are deep pockets of rural need that must not be tolerated, he said, and asserted that these pockets exist both in small towns and on farms ‘that have been bypassed by the march of prosperity.’”<sup>82</sup>

In these passages the stark contrast is made between rural poverty and the larger prosperity of the larger country. Much like the march of prosperity has passed the urban youth, it also has bypassed these pockets of poverty that exist outside of the city streets. The description of the lifestyle as bleak and deprived also is placed into tension with the larger growth and national affluence. Later in the Tribune’s article the author also references Secretary of Agriculture Orville L. Freeman’s description of the rural need as those who “live under the conditions of poverty.”<sup>83</sup>

While the fact of poverty does not arise at this moment as poverty has existed in the previous American paradigms there is sense of a rediscovery of the poor. In fact the rural poor offer a lens in which to test this belief. We have already seen that rural America is described as separated from the major cities and urban centers of the country. The authors are careful to reference the image of the poor farmer as a symbol of a battleground in the War on Poverty. We now turn to this separation as a larger factor of the system, and as a major factor in the limitations of opportunity. I specifically wish to look at constant description of “Appalachia” as a metaphor for poverty. This image operates in two ways, the first being to continue the logic of the first passages presented

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<sup>81</sup> “Bigger Agricultural Subsidies”, *New York Times*, February 1, 1964

<sup>82</sup> “Plan to Help Farmers Told by Freeman”, *Chicago Tribune*

<sup>83</sup> *ibid*

in this section, the description of the “pockets of poverty”. The second area I wish to examine is the image of Appalachia as separate or removed from the larger society.

To begin we look at an article entitled “Aid for Appalachia” written in the New York Times:

“Human deprivation is nowhere more oppressively widespread than in Appalachia, the ribbon of social neglect stretching from Pennsylvania to Alabama. The program President Johnson intends to send to Congress today to combat the region’s chronic depression represents the first installment in mobilizing the combined energies of the Federal, state and local agencies for one of the most crucial campaigns in the war against poverty” and “The economic and social factors that cause an area to run downhill cannot be reversed in a year or two. And nowhere is that more likely to prove true in this mountain region so backward in education, facilities, and industrial potential.”<sup>84</sup>

The writer here is creating a rhetorical linkage between the concept of “social neglect” and the backwards nature of the region’s economy. The fact, according to this article, is that the reasons for the lack of facilities and educational structures are cause of “economic and social factors”. In the previous section I argued that the functioning definition of poverty creates a sense of fault in the structuring of the economic system. Here the writer has widened the scope and placed blame on the social systems within which Appalachia exists, and he has chosen to call these social factors a product of social neglect. In fact, the oppressive state of life that exists in this neglected section of America is matched by none other. Appalachia sets the standard for the lowest quality of life, the description of the most poor.

We can also look at a few of the ways in which the writer has defined the situation of social neglect. We understand by use of the term “chronic” that this neglect

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<sup>84</sup> “Aid for Appalachia”, *New York Times*, April 27, 1964

is not a recent phenomenon but rather a long existing factor in the denial of opportunity. In fact the author goes as far as to blame the “downhill” run of the region on these social and economic factors. We see that the idea of social neglect aligns with the basis of the “pockets of poverty”, as this region is viewed in a different light than the rest of the country might.

The same logic is offered in an article from the Washington Post reflecting on the planned expansion of highway system in Appalachia:

“By whatever economic or social yardsticks that are used to measure the quality of American life, most of Appalachia’s 15.3 million people suffer by comparison with the rest of the country. They earn less money, obtain a poorer education, and enjoy fewer public services than the average American”

And,

“For even if the highway strategy should fail-and it is not likely to be a complete failure-a precedent and administrative framework will have been established for improving the lot of an isolated, exploited and forgotten population.”<sup>85</sup>

We clearly see the reference to the invisibility of the region in author’s description of the area’s population as “forgotten”. The emphasis placed on highways also offers an interesting argument in relation to the social opportunity framework. The lack of highways is distinctive of political and economic factors that justify the large expenditure of governmental funds, and it seems to be the case that Appalachia does not fit into these larger political agendas. In fact, the author highlights that this region enjoys fewer public services than the rest of the country, again showing a disconnect between the political machine and the suffering citizens of Appalachia.

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<sup>85</sup> “Developing Appalachia”, *Washington Post*



The description of the slums follows much of the same logic that is directed at rural poverty, and the Appalachian region. What links the first two areas in this section is the understanding that location provides a means by which to understand poverty. Either resources are not accessed in the same equal manner as the affluent neighborhoods, or in the segregated nature of the region. Being born in such a location offers a prediction of the economic lifestyle that the majority will live, as a continuation of a large organizational understanding of the fact of poverty.

We see this argument made in the Los Angeles Times:

“It does not matter, in truth, whether the slum areas are inhabited mainly by Negroes or white people. What matters is that the schools in such areas are almost invariably poorer in every respect, with meaner playgrounds, nastier buildings, fewer and less qualified teachers and so on, than the schools in the same city’s middle class area.”<sup>86</sup>

The first item to notice is that while earlier I offered passages that link racial discrimination and discrimination of the poor, this author takes a step back and argues that discrimination is not tied to race, but that both whites and blacks, who inhabit the slums, face the same barriers to removing themselves from the state of poverty. In addition, he offers that universally the slums are worse suited to provide education for its students, and that the facilities in which this education occurs also face discrimination. Later in the article we see an argument in favor of discrimination to benefit the depressed areas of the slums. The article states that,

“Hence the schools in the slum areas need much larger investments than the middle class areas, as at present – so that air and sunlight and hood teaching and play space and study space will give the children which the slum area schools

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<sup>86</sup> “Johnson Gets off to Good Start”, *Los Angeles Times*

serve the opportunity which every young American ought to have. For this purpose, discrimination in favor of these schools is simply unavoidable.”<sup>87</sup>

### The Public Ethic

So far in this chapter we have looked at poverty under the framework of to be poor is to be denied opportunities of services by a larger system that exists beyond one's own control. Within this framework we have seen descriptions of the poor as hidden by society, victimized by social and economic factors, and separate from the larger national flourishing. In this next section I wish to look more at the discussion around the duty of the American populous to take care of or assist the poor. Since the declaration of war on poverty the words of LBJ have offered a deeper commitment by the American populous. We see this clearly in an article by the Washington Post:

“Poverty not only strikes at the needs of the body. It attacks the human spirit. It undermines human dignity. No American can at ease with his conscience until this kind of poverty is wiped out. It is not enough for the fortunate among us to count their blessings. They should also mark, every day, what they and their country have done to extend those blessing to all.”<sup>88</sup>

Here poverty is described as an object separated from the experience of the human being. Poverty becomes its own idea that can only exist through the failure of the affluent to pass along their blessings to the masses. Here we can again see the power of the image of a war on poverty, as not only is poverty removed from the human experience, it also ought to trouble all Americans as the attacks against the least advantaged reign on. The public ethic arrives from the assault on human dignity, a fact that Johnson holds inexcusable.

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<sup>87</sup> *ibid*

<sup>88</sup> “Excerpt from President's Speech”, *Washington Post*

We also see a reaction to Johnson's changed focus in the political relationship between the poor and the State in an article published in the Los Angeles Times:

“The news is that President Johnson has at long recognized the basic principle that must underlie any attempt to solve the problem of poverty in the midst of affluence. This principle is, quite simply, that discrimination in favor of the distressed and underprivileged is not merely a practical necessity; it is also morally unavoidable. Those who share in the benefits of the affluent society America has created have no right to growl or grumble about extra investments to help the non-sharers.”<sup>89</sup>

Though written prior to any large policy announcements, the article cites the impending policy aims of the Johnson Administration's War on Poverty. This passage takes these policies and adds a deeper imperative. The discussion is no longer centered around the effectiveness of the policies and rather becomes a discussion on what is the right thing to do, and what do we owe the poor citizens of the USA? This passage also offers that the Johnson Administration's approach to the impending battle is a dramatic shift from that of previous policies and goals in relation to the needy and the suffering. This supports the argument that I made at the top of this chapter, that Johnson urges a civic notion of the Great Society, one where citizens are taken care due to their individual human dignity, and not because they may offer something in return for such an investment.

In relation to the theoretical understanding of the ideograph McGee argued that the narrative construction of the term “poverty” creates a sense of mass belief, or a normative means by which actions occur within. What has been offered so far argues that the understanding of the culpability for poverty calls on the shoulders of a larger system that

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<sup>89</sup> “Johnson Gets Off to Good Start on Proposal to Aid Distressed”, *Los Angeles Times*

denies opportunities. This denial occurs in the forms of unemployment due to the characteristics of the capitalism market place, through the dispersal and access to social services, through the quality of education available, and in the location by which poverty exists. All of these separate narratives that construct an image of the poor separate the culpability from the actions of the individual agent, and rather admit that larger political forces that drive such policies exist outside of the scope of the poor agent's control. This means that the emphasis on the communitarian ethic has in fact taken hold, as it is only within a society that accepts poverty as a negative fact of life, which is not due to personal fault, that such a public ethic can manifest itself. It is one thing to agree on the fact that poverty is to lack material needs, it is another to argue that larger redistribution is needed to correct for such imbalances.

Even the characterization that McGee offers in reference to the "people" holds true in the War on Poverty Era. The "people" of the poor, or the artificial label placed on the group of persons who lack these material needs, is understood as the collection of individual agents whom has been passed over by the larger prosperity of the nation. This image of the passed-over is also used to justify and provide the moral weight to calls for sacrifice by the wealthy, and the image of the broken down school is deemed unacceptable by the larger political discussion of political agents. The ideology of a public ethic of social support also justifies the use of power by the state, in relation to this image of the poor. If the poor themselves are assumed as the cause of run-down school

buildings, and broken playgrounds, then political support for policies that justified 947.5 million dollars of spending would have lacked this wider approval.<sup>90</sup>

This means that a major reason Johnson's War on Poverty legislation, the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964, was passed by a margin of 266-184 in the House was due to the Administration's successful creation of a narrative of victimization even against the conservative voice of self-fault and self-harm. Even the naysayers in Johnson's own parties voted against the bill because of "political motivations" as opposed to disagreement with the President's policy.<sup>91</sup>

Following from the thoughts of Dana Cloud it is incumbent upon the critic to question the issues motivating ideographic choices, as well as to assess potential consequences of public adherence to a particular category of motives."<sup>92</sup> Even if we accept some of the claims of dissenting voices in Washington, that this policy was more politically motivated than actually focused on the needs of the poor, it seems that such a policy can only offer a beneficial increase in the meager access of wealth by the poor prior to the legislation. The normalization of the image of the poor as victims seems to offer no harm to the poor themselves, as it offers a view that frees them from culpability for their own suffering. Such an image also benefits the poor in concrete examples of increased funding for inner-city education, increased transportation access for depressed rural areas, and probably even more beneficial, the image of poor placed the poor back in the center of the political discussions.

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<sup>90</sup> "LBJ Wins Victory on Poverty Bill", *Los Angeles Times*

<sup>91</sup> "House Passes Poverty Bill", *Chicago Tribune*

<sup>92</sup> Dana Cloud, "The Rhetoric of Family Values: Scapegoating, Utopia, and the Privatization of Social Responsibility." *Western Journal of Communication* 62 (1998): 389

The emergence of the public ethic also sought to reconnect the narrative of the hidden poor with the narrative of American prosperity. We see the description of the poor from the Wall Street Journal as “politically invisible, without lobbies of their own.”<sup>93</sup> While the poor might still lack the financial ability to effectively lobby or pressure political agents, the narrative of the poor as the victims of the larger system created a de-facto political lobby in the American consciousness. Those who accepted the Administration’s view also connected with the suffering of the poor, and thus the lobbies of the American voters and actors became the functioning lobby for the poor.

The domination of an ideology that views the poor as separate from the causes of poverty creates a political myth which justified additional support and aid for such communities. By reconnecting the narrative of the American poor with the concept of America as “land of opportunity” the poor are made better off, and therefore there seems to be no reason to oppose such a construction. In fact this reading of the War on Poverty takes us down the wrong path, as we begin to offer solutions to poverty that are separated from the political agency of the poor. By stripping the poor of their culpability what we in fact normalize is once again the idea of the “needy poor”, not just because they lack material needs, but due to their lack of political agency. The poor are then pushed out of the discussion of poverty, and the power to control the future of poverty is now located in the agent of the State and its assault on the market.

## Dissent

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<sup>93</sup> “Focus on Poverty”, *The Wall Street Journal*

The final location I wish to analyze is the existence of the anti-victimization narrative that did exist in the political climate of the War on Poverty. While I have argued that the dominant understand of poverty placed culpability on the American economic, political, and social systems, other voices did occur, but they lacked the political support to oppose the enactment of the above listed policies. There are two separate narratives about the poor that are created, and I wish to analyze the political myths that they create. The first is a conception of poverty as a self-inflicted wound, or that to be in poverty is due to actions that you have made, and therefore you are the cause of your own poverty. The second line, and while functioning on some of the same logic, is that the poor are denying themselves the opportunity for economic advancement.

The first conception of poverty as separated from the system is offered a in a few different ways, the first being the lack of drive by the poor to better their own lives. For an example we turn to an article published in the Wall Street Journal:

"In sum, the whole approach here seems to have little to do with the realities of unemployment insofar as it relates to poverty. There are employment opportunities; at least part of the trouble is that a good many people lack the ambition or energy or interest to take advantage of them."<sup>94</sup>

While it would be impossible to engage the line that argues that ambition is lacking, we can address the language as presented in the ability of the poor to find employment. What has been offered thus far is the relationship between the poor and market places the poor at a disadvantage when seeking employment, as the poor are pushed out of jobs by technology, and lack the education infrastructure to be retrained or move in the market. In fact, we have seen a large percentage of articles highlight the

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<sup>94</sup> "New War, Old Weapons", *Wall Street Journal*

inadequacies of the public education system. This means that there perhaps are jobs available, but a lack of an opportunity exists in order to access these jobs. This argument also fails to engage with an understanding of the cycle of poverty, or the continuation of the lack of opportunity due to historical and systemic consequences.

The next way that this argument presented is in reference to the historical image of the hard working immigrant. As stated in the Wall Street Journal:

“It is bad history because almost all of us are up from poverty and almost none of our forebears considered it anyone’s responsibility but his own to get up. The pioneer was poor; so was the Irish and Jewish immigrant, the freed slave. Sometimes a more fortunate person helped a less fortunate one, sometimes not. For a long time America as a nation was poor, underdeveloped as they say today. What transformed general poverty into general prosperity was neither a collective guilt complex nor Government.”<sup>95</sup>

This article offers much for this project, both in terms of the framing of Johnson’s public ethic as a “collective guilt complex”, but also that it offers an image to challenge the image of the poor that we have seen so far. In this case the poor immigrant is a hardworking individual who has pulled himself up through his own hard work. This issue that this line of argumentation faces, when placed in tension with the functioning image of poverty, is that it matters little how hardworking an agent is, but rather what opportunities have been opened to them. The pioneer is poor, but has an opportunity to increase his share of the economic pie. The poor, as referenced by Johnson, are living without this opportunity, due to factors that keep them shut out from quality education, and other social services. This chapter has highlighted many of these factors, anywhere from location of birth, to family of birth, to facts such as race and health.

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<sup>95</sup> “A Philosophy of Poverty”, *Wall Street Journal*



The final argument I wish to present is the characterization of the poor as the cause of their own loss of opportunity. For this we turn to logic that links family size with poverty. An example published in the New York Times reads:

“Birth control information is widely available to most of the public; it makes little sense to maintain policies which effectively deny it to groups where it might do the most good. Many welfare recipients, New York’s relief commissioner reports, simply do not know it is available. And yet many recipients are the very people who fall into the unhealthy trap of bearing more children than they can hope to support properly, then watching these children grow up to bring a third generation into the squalid life of public assistance.”<sup>96</sup>

While seeming to buy into the crux of the cycle of poverty argument, this statement places the burden of poverty on the parents who bear more children than they can support. This means that instead of the individual ethic we have just seen, there is an understanding that not all who are in poverty can pull themselves out of the struggle. In concedes some of the Johnson public ethic argument as well, as the parents must place the chance of their children’s success over that of their own wants and needs. While it might appear strange to see a conservative advocating support for birth control, this statement appears much more sinister than a slight suggestion. In fact, it argues that the poor are not informed enough to know about what access there is, but also that description of the poor family is one that cannot control their own sexual actions.

I feel that it is important to recognize the voices of dissent in the era as not only addressing the role that a system plays in poverty, but as retuning poverty to the individual while at the same time arguing for the universal. To argue that factors like birth control might impact the spread of poverty holds that on one hand it is the choice of

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<sup>96</sup> “Birth Control and Poverty”, *Wall Street Journal*

the individual that contributes to poverty, but also that every poor person makes the same individual choices. Where this plays a larger role is that while locating the fact of poverty in individual choices, the Right is willing to accept the core of Johnson's argument; something must be done. They choose to locate the most viable agent of change in the community, in the factors that constitute action. For the GOP at this time we must hold to a communitarian focus on the subject of family values, but at the same time create a space that separates the choices of the poor from those who are not poor. So then as Johnson wants to bring the poor back into a system which they can use to pull themselves out of the scourge of poverty, it is the voice of the GOP that begins the demonization of the poor, and in fact through this demonization we lose the ability argue for poverty without also addressing the inherent fear of poverty that circulates in this narrative.

### Debriefing the War on Poverty

Years after the start of the War on Poverty we are placed in a location where we can begin to identify the positive of negative factors that this assault had. Over the next few pages I argue that War on Poverty was a failure as it did not meet its stated goal: the alleviation on poverty. This is not to say the complete alleviation of the fact of poverty, but rather the steps towards a sustainable assault on the fact of poverty, or material need and want. In fact even if we are to accept that we cannot completely eliminate poverty we ought to look at where we stand today after the first fifty years of this war. To do this

I want to look at three battlegrounds for the war: the real poverty level, education reform, and employment and job creation.

Beginning with the stated statistics on poverty what we find is that as Johnson was entering the War on Poverty the poverty rate was fixed at 19%.<sup>97</sup> We then see a steady drop in this rate until 1983 when the rates moves upwards from 12.4% in 1979 to 15.2%. Tavis Smiley and Cornel West blame this change on the conservative backlash to the Vietnam War, a paradox in that our anger at one war starts to chip away at the gains of another.<sup>98</sup> As the war in Vietnam became closely tied to the Democratic Party, even staunch pro-War on Poverty voters began to move to the new creation of the conservative party located in the ideals of Ronald Reagan. The next jump we see is in 1992 up to 14.5% when the effects of the Reagan Administration's slashing of governmental benefits programs is continued, and intensified by the Clinton Administration.<sup>99</sup> By 1993 the gains of the past are removed and we once again reach the levels of 198.<sup>100</sup> From here the story we are told by the poverty level shows a steady decline in rates until 2007 when 37.3 million Americans are classified as poor prior to the Great Recession, totaling a rate of 12.5%.<sup>101</sup> After this the rate continues to grow through the recession until we reach the current rate of 15.1% in 2010, and even more recently with the number of Americans labeled as poor in 2011 being approximately 50 million.<sup>102</sup>

Where does this leave us? The first point we can show is that the poverty rate fluctuates and has ticked up and dropped down many times since Johnson's speech. This

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<sup>97</sup> Smiley, Tavis, and Cornel West. *The Rich and the Rest of Us: A Poverty Manifesto*. New York: Smiley, 2012. Print. 17

<sup>98</sup> *ibid*

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid* 18

<sup>100</sup> *ibid*

<sup>101</sup> *ibid*

<sup>102</sup> *ibid* 16

ought not be blamed solely on the policies of Johnson, as we can see that he would not have been able to predict actions by other politicians or even economic downturns. In fact we see that the poverty rate has dropped overall since the War on poverty from 19% to 15.1%. While there are today more individuals in poverty due to increases in the size of the nation's population Johnson makes apparent gains. The statistics that I find more telling are not the poverty rates themselves but the shares of the total wealth. According to the Economic Policy Institute in the early 1960s (a few years before the War on Poverty is launched) the top 1% of American household's net worth was 125 times the median held wealth.<sup>103</sup> Over that same time period the top 20% of households held 15 times the median wealth, and today the gap is 23 times.<sup>104</sup>

So then even if we have created more wealth as a country, the inherent flaw of the market, the incentivization of the accumulation of wealth, has not been overturned; it has gotten worse. Looking at additional data from 1983 to 2009 we see that the share of wealth by the top 1% has risen 40.2% and for the top 20%, 9.8%.<sup>105</sup> Today in the United States of America the top 400 individuals in terms of held wealth equals the total wealth controlled by the bottom 150 million citizens.<sup>106</sup> The War on Poverty then has lower the percentage of Americans living in poverty, but at the same time has made the poor poorer and the rich richer. While again we cannot blame the entirety of this paradox on LBJ, what we can say is that when his Administration and the normalized definition of "poverty" created the inactive for the State to act. Instead of addressing the root causes

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<sup>103</sup> Sahadi, Jeanne. "Wealth Gap Has Widened more than 50% during past 40 Years." *CNNMoney*. Cable News Network, 29 Aug. 2006. Web. 27 Nov. 2012. <[http://money.cnn.com/2006/08/29/news/economy/wealth\\_gap/](http://money.cnn.com/2006/08/29/news/economy/wealth_gap/)>.

<sup>104</sup> *ibid*

<sup>105</sup> Smiley, Tavis, and Cornel West. *The Rich and the Rest of Us: A Poverty Manifesto*. New York: Smiley, 2012. Print. 14

<sup>106</sup> Smiley, Tavis, and Cornel West. *The Rich and the Rest of Us: A Poverty Manifesto*. New York: Smiley, 2012. Print. 43

of poverty we fall into the trap of lowering an arbitrary rate for political gain, and at the same time bettering those who fund the ability to run TV ads bragging that we have lowered the rates.

The next attempt of the War on Poverty was to offer “learning as an escape from poverty.”<sup>107</sup> In other words, we seek to offer the promise of education as a means to escape from the fact of poverty through expanding access to education. When we can offer higher quality teachers, more funding for schools, better curriculums, and more life skill training we allow for the children who exist in the fact of the cycle of poverty to learn the means by which they cannot become poor as well. While we may accept the premise we also must look to the policies of reform like the Elementary and Secondary Education Act passed in 1965. This legislation offered the first major attempt by the United States Federal government to regulate school curriculum and create the precedent for aid to schools. As the bill states:

“In recognition of the special educational needs of low-income families and the impact that concentrations of low-income families have on the ability of local educational agencies to support adequate educational programs, the Congress hereby declares it to be the policy of the United States to provide financial assistance... to local educational agencies serving areas with concentrations of children from low-income families to expand and improve their educational programs by various means (including preschool programs) which contribute to meeting the special educational needs of educationally deprived children.”<sup>108</sup>

We then can see three distinct consequences of the act’s passage and it’s perceived benefits in LBJ’s own words “for every one of the billion dollars that we spend on this program, will come back tenfold as schools dropouts change to school graduates.” The

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<sup>107</sup> "Lyndon B. JohnsonThe Great Society." *Lyndon B. Johnson The Great Society*. N.p., n.d. Web. 21 Apr. 2013.

<sup>108</sup> "Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965." *Social Welfare History Project*. N.p., n.d. Web. 28 Nov. 2012. <<http://www.socialwelfarehistory.com/events/elementary-and-secondary-education-act-of-1965/>>.

first of these is a switch from aid in general to aid in specific, or grants of federal monies that were now tied to objectives as dictated by the federal government.<sup>109</sup> This sets the stage for the later reforms of ESSA with programs like Leave No Child behind under the Bush Administration. The second consequence is that Johnson avoids the religious tension in education by providing funding based on the poor students, as opposed to the institutions they attend. This allowed for non-public schools to also be eligible for funding offering another way of learning to remove from poverty<sup>110</sup>. Finally the act, while derived from federal mandates, used state bureaucracies to actually administer funds, resulting in a higher rate of hiring workers for the State governments.<sup>111</sup> In the long term these reforms provide for more State power over education and create the later tension between the federalism of the education system.

So then not only does the attempt at education reform have consequences not foreseen by Johnson we also can look to the long term sustainability of the War on Poverty's attempt to provide more educational access. According to the Children's Defense Fund there are currently 16 million children living in poverty in the United States; that is 21.6% of all children!<sup>112</sup> Of these almost 7 million live in extreme poverty.<sup>113</sup> Nearly 40 million children rely on the nation's School Lunch program for a regular healthy meal.<sup>114</sup> What does this mean? Even if we are able to "reform" the educational system, the fact that so many enter with the cloud of extreme poverty means that any attempt to offer this education must also face these realities. A child living in

<sup>109</sup> ibid

<sup>110</sup> ibid

<sup>111</sup> ibid

<sup>112</sup> Smiley, Tavis, and Cornel West. *The Rich and the Rest of Us: A Poverty Manifesto*. New York: Smiley, 2012. Print. 53

<sup>113</sup> Ibid 53

<sup>114</sup> Ibid 54

poverty lacks access to other materials necessary to participate in this educational system, and even if that mind arrives ready to learn the fact of lack of nutrition or transportation or familial support or any other factor undermines our ability to correct for the fact of poverty through education. When 1.6 million children are considered homeless it seems that education is almost the least of our concerns, and creating a safe environment where basic needs can be met must be our priority.

Finally we must look to the fact of job creation, or the idea that through assistance from the State jobs could be created in order to assist in the removal of the poor from the state of poverty. Under the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 Johnson offered four different methods to increase employment. The first of these was creation of both the Head Start program and the Job Corps, a work-training program, and a work-study program.<sup>115</sup> The second were Community Action Programs (CAPS) which were designed to allowed members of poor communities to develop and implement their own economic models.<sup>116</sup> Thirdly, Johnson wanted to create the VISTA program, the Volunteers in Service of America, to recruit and train citizens on jobs skills.<sup>117</sup> Finally Johnson created the Office of Economic Opportunity which sought to provide funds and grants to the currently unemployed in order to assist them in their search for new jobs.<sup>118</sup>

The issue with this approach is framed in its relation to the root causes inherent to the fact of poverty, and the social forces that alter the process to removing oneself from

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<sup>115</sup> Bell, Stephanie A., and L. Randall Wray. *THE WAR ON POVERTY AFTER 40 YEARS A Minskyan Assessment*. Digital image. Levy Economics Institute. N.p., 2004. Web. 28 Nov. 2012. <<http://www.levyinstitute.org/pubs/ppb78.pdf>>.

<sup>116</sup> *ibid*

<sup>117</sup> *ibid*

<sup>118</sup> *ibid*

that poverty. Johnson reintroduced a conception of poverty that argues that poverty is not your fault, but rather due to the larger system of capitalism and its inherent limitations. After a closer look at what Johnson actually does, we begin to see a radically different conception of a duty to the poor.

The first alarm bell that goes off is the fact that while poverty is due to the fact of capitalism; the proposed solution is to create more capitalists. Johnson locates the fact of economic poverty in three areas: transitional technology that results in layoffs, lack of necessary education, and lack of infrastructure. Again he argues that these are beyond the control of the poor and therefore the State has a moral obligation to assist by creating new jobs, facilitating new job training, and building more roads. All three of these solutions locate the escape route to poverty in the very fact of income. This seems to make sense as to be poor is to not be able to afford the necessary material needs, and therefore putting more money in the bank accounts of the poor means more consumption and therefore more meeting of these needs.

What Johnson misses is that this move to an increase consuming due to more consumers does little to change the inherent inequalities in the system that the State is not addressing. To provide more consumers does not weaken the capitalist market's ability to continue these same programs and causes of poverty. To retrain workers now does not mean that the retraining will guarantee success when the market once again changes. To provide more income to families does little to control prices, or create this new access to basic needs.



In fact this new ability to be a consumer dictates a normalization of the conception that materialism is what is needed to combat poverty. As Cornell West and Travis Smiley argue, “If we don our historical lens, we’ll see a once-democratic vision now compromised and corrupted by materialism and greed that has morphed into an insatiable, capitalist monster that threatens our very existence.”<sup>119</sup> Where Johnson fails is in the attempt to locate poverty in the market and then not reform or reject the market. The inherent paradox of capitalism is located in what West and Smiley offer; the way out of poverty is to not buy into a lens of materialism as this is driving force of the capitalist market itself. Why would we, the American people, ever allow for a real discussion on capitalism when the War on Poverty argues that we ought make that same system better? What does it mean when we believe that it can be made better? In this way we see that one of the necessary implications of Johnson’s narrative of poverty is to argue for a compassionate capitalism; a market which can be tailored to the needs of the poor in providing more opportunity. Again when we recognize the fact that the market led to the creation of the poverty, as Johnson argues in his idea of the lack of opportunity, we see that to put the poor back into the market does not check the inherent flaws of that market.

This leads us to the next flaw of the War on Poverty’s narrative; the idea that even if we can reform capitalism the State is a legitimate actor by which to take on this task. There are two reasons for this; the first is the fact of global capitalism, and the second is the inability to separate the oppressive force of the market from the power of the State. Focusing on global capitalism I turn to an editorial written by Anne Applebaum. Her

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<sup>119</sup> Smiley, Tavis, and Cornel West. *The Rich and the Rest of Us: A Poverty Manifesto*. New York: Smiley, 2012. Print. 34

work, published in the Washington Post, accidentally pulls the man from behind the curtain as she debunks the myth of national capitalism in her scathing, but ill-informed response to the Occupy movement. For Applebaum, “Yet in one sense, the international Occupy movement’s failure to produce sound legislative proposals is understandable: both the sources of the global economic crisis and the solutions to it lie, by definition, outside the competence of local and national politicians.”<sup>120</sup> What ought to stand out to us are a few key phrases that need to be discussed further, the most obvious being the “competence” of politicians, and the second the appeal to legislative solutions. Without knowing that this thesis would be written Applebaum has created the two problems areas this thesis seeks to analyze, and shows the necessary implications of the normalized “poverty” of the Johnson Administration.

So then while I admit that the modern conception of global capitalism was not realized during the Johnsonian War on Poverty, we can see that basic facts of both line up. When Johnson argues for the new consumer he is paving the route for the continued poverty due to the continuation of capitalism as a legitimate economic system. We must realize that the State itself is unable to control the global factors of the market, and thus any attempts to correct the flaws of the domestic market are met with the unchanging issues of the global market. So then when Applebaum is arguing that Occupy’s actions are ineffective through legislative mechanisms, so too must be Johnson’s. An attempt to locate the domestic poverty as separate from the global conception of poverty falls to the incompetence of both politicians and their legislative agendas.

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<sup>120</sup> Zizek, Slavoj. *The Year of Dreaming Dangerously*. London: VERSO, 2012. Print. 84

So then the second area of concern is not just the inability of the government to effectively control the factors of poverty, but this false belief that the State is separate from the oppression of the market. What makes Johnson's conception of the system's responsibility for the poor unique is that it is at this moment that the dominant narrative justifies a separation of the system and the State. If we buy that the people of the United States are at war with poverty there seems to be an assumption that the State can attack the system on behalf of the poor. Much in the same way that all wars are fought by the State the people who create and uphold the State are fundamentally separate from the choices and decisions that are made on the ground. This means that for Johnson the system is separate from the State, the means to oppression are located outside of the commonwealth, located rather in the ideas that govern our economic system.

This seems to be problematic for a few reasons. The first is that it assumes that the State and capitalism can exist separate from the other. Rather we see that the functioning of the market has large consequence on the political climate of the State. Incumbent elected officials are held more to blame if the market is performing poorly. Government's actions are tied to money in the coffers, and tax revenue is impacted by the performance of the market. What we in fact see is that the market is a large determiner of the politic of the State. We can also look to factors like campaign finance, or issues that while tied to the functioning of the market are not a direct connector of the market and the State. We also see that the State attempts to regulate the actions of those in the market, and while we call these market regulation, the reality of the situation dictates a lack of action by the individuals who allow the market to function.

This statement also seems problematic as it locates the source of oppression outside the idea of the State. The use of capital creates an asymmetrical relationship between the rich and the poor, the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. When we admit that the State is influenced by the market we see that capital also creates an asymmetrical relationship between the idea of capital and the State. We assent to the political myth of capital in order to not only justify the exchange of power, but the very means by which it is used. The State becomes the means to our oppression because it gives us a false hope at the reform of the system, blocking our gaze to the real source of the problem, the market and capital. This is what Slavoj Zizek describes as the attempt to “democratize capitalism”, or the ability to

“extend democratic control to the economy, through the pressure of mass media, parliamentary inquiries, stronger regulation, honest police investigations, and so on. But what is never questioned is the democratic institutional framework of the (bourgeois) state of law itself.”<sup>121</sup>

Whereas Johnson is willing to accept the failings of the market, what he is unwilling to accept are the failing of the democratic system; a system that privileges those who have exploited the belief in the market. It is at this point that our cycle of poverty comes full circle. We, the people of the United State or whatever capitalist body we are from, vote for the political leader who can best act against the fat of poverty while ignoring that this elected leader cannot confront the reality of the oppression, both in the ritual of voting and ritual of passing ineffective legislation. We are able to claim that we tried, while at the same time holding true to the facts of our political existence. The rich

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<sup>121</sup> Zizek, Slavoj. *The Year of Dreaming Dangerously*. London: VERSO, 2012. Print. 86

and middle classes, those with some claim to the capital that drives the political, do not have the deciding vote on how we ought to pursue poverty.

What this process leads to is a false belief that the State is no longer culpable in the functioning of oppression, and in fact ought to be viewed as the champion of the working class. The ideograph of “poverty” at the time of the War on Poverty gave the poor the belief that the Democratic Party could be the ally needed to combat oppression, but in reality was now a primary means by which the State was able to oppress. This process allowed the State to avoid standing trial for its crimes, and instead normalized the means of oppression as a source of liberation. If we buy that the War on Poverty succeeds in supplying the unemployed with jobs then the new consumers of the poor are able to create more economic growth for the market. The system remains the same, and the redistribution of wealth is not altered, instead the poor now believe they are better off. They now become the means by which the capitalist system is able to claim the ability to improve, all the while allowing for same process that created the War on Poverty to continue. The voice of the progressive has now been co-opted as the champion of the State. As Gianni Vattimo argues, “As a result, today the left is called upon to help save banks, that is, the capitalist system, for the good of the workers, and so on”<sup>122</sup>. What is left when there is no voice to challenge the spread of the capitalist superstructure? Even those who are not leftist in their beliefs ought to see the value that a voice of dissent can

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<sup>122</sup> Douzinas, Costas, and Slavoj Žižek. *The Idea of Communism*. London: Verso, 2010. Print. 207

play in regards to the political myth. It at least stops the rampant spread of unchecked ideology.

### Conclusion

As we move to the next section of this thesis focused on the modern conception of actions to alleviate poverty, it is fundamental to understand the functioning of the ideograph “poverty” that is normalized during the Johnson Administration. Over the past few pages I have argued that under the LBJ Administration we can see a functioning definition of poverty that is tied to the factors of the system and the lack of opportunity due to that system. This a drastic shift from FDR who argued that, ““The test of our progress is not whether we add more to the abundance of those who have much; it is whether we provide enough for those who have too little.” For FDR poverty is then not tied to the facts of the market, but real inequality amongst the American system. What makes Johnson unique is not just his use the State to combat poverty, as FDR’s New Deal did as well. Rather it is that he creates a separation in the two, whereas FDR does not tie inequality to either force, but rather to the fact of inequality itself. This is why the ideograph is key in allow us to arrive at a deconstruction of the narrative located in the Obama Administration. It not only allows us to trace the origin on the modern debate, but also to show that what FDR offered was not what we see from LBJ.

The importance of the ideograph is located not in the ways in which the term is used, but rather in the way in which this term not only creates a political myth, but in its inherent connection to the use of power. The term poverty then is a commonplace term

used to justify or attack state intervention into the market. This is the case for three reasons: the first is that we see the continuance of the idea of the “War on Poverty” as a frame to discuss and/or justify the use of the State’s force. This is tied inherently to McGee’s definition of the ideograph, in that it normalizes the use of force, in this case the use of the State’s power. The second reason is that we cannot move past this point in time in regards to the modern conception of the definition of “poverty”. I argue that we can move past the next presidential administrations due to the fact that they either do not fit into this conception of poverty, or the political motivations have been altered. This is not to say that the ideograph poverty no longer exists, but rather that the ways that Reagan and Clinton address the term poverty are much different. Reagan and Clinton both argue that the State is not able to solve poverty, as poverty is a fault of the individual.<sup>123</sup> The war moves from a war on poverty to a war on those who live in poverty.

This narrative is then not attempting to extend the power of the State, but rather to extend the power of the market through the guise of individual choice. When we see the connections between Obama and LBJ we can argue either that the term has been reintroduced in the way that we discuss the use of force, or that we have rejected the other conceptions of poverty in favor of this definition. The third reason that the LBJ ideographical work is important is based not only on the comparisons made between the two administrations, but in the way that they both justify the expansion of the State’s power. What we see in the Reagan/Clinton years is a use of the term poverty to reject the expansion of the State or to curb expansion. Obama and LBJ use of the definition of

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<sup>123</sup> Smiley, Tavis, and Cornel West. *The Rich and the Rest of Us: A Poverty Manifesto*. New York: Smiley, 2012. Print. 63

poverty as tied to lack of opportunity due to the system they then justify the use of force in areas not typically held by the State, or that Obama offers a return to the narrative that begins under Johnson.



## Chapter Three

### *The Obama Administration and the Second War on Poverty*

“And if you will join me in this improbable quest, if you feel destiny calling, and see as I see, a future of endless possibility stretching before us; if you sense, as I sense, that the time is now to shake off our slumber, and slough off our fear, and make good on the debt we owe past and future generations, then I'm ready to take up the cause, and march with you, and work with you. Together, starting today, let us finish the work that needs to be done, and usher in a new birth of freedom on this Earth.”

–Barack Obama February 10, 2007

With these brief words Senator Barack Obama announced his candidacy for the Presidency of the United States. With these words candidate Obama opened a new paradigm in the American political story, one which culminated in his election as the first minority president in the history of the union. In his announcement speech Obama uses the term poverty twice; first to recall the historical memory of the new deal, and second to call upon the crowd gathered in front of him to be “the generation that ends poverty in America.”<sup>124</sup> We can see the immediate comparison's with the speech and that given by Lyndon B. Johnson from the halls of Congress asking the American people to support a “cooperative approach to help that one-fifth of all American families with incomes too small to even meet their basic needs.”<sup>125</sup> Both attempt to argue and project a communal approach to the issues surrounding poverty, and both use this idea of ending poverty to raise support from their base.

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<sup>124</sup> “Illinois Sen. Barack Obama's Announcement Speech.” *Washington Post*. The Washington Post, 10 Feb. 2007. Web. 27 Nov. 2012. <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/02/10/AR2007021000879.html>>

<sup>125</sup> “President Lyndon B. Johnson's Annual Message to the Congress on the State of the Union January 8, 1964 [ As Delivered in Person before a Joint Session ].” *President Lyndon B. Johnson's Annual Message to the Congress on the State of the Union January 8, 1964*. N.p., n.d. Web. 27 Nov. 2012. <<http://www.lbjlib.utexas.edu/johnson/archives.hom/speeches.hom/640108.asp>>

The difference we see is that Johnson uses poverty as a way to garner support while in office, and Obama to make it to that office. We also can see a difference in the long term support for the policies surrounding poverty based on the time given to the topic. Obama uses the term “poverty” twice in this speech but only once in his State of the Union. In comparison LBJ uses the term 9 times in his 1964 State of the Union. While these two speeches don’t allow us to look at the application of the term “poverty” itself, what we find when we look closer is that after the 2008 campaign President Obama stops using the term. This leads Paul Tough, a leading social commentator on the issues that surround poverty, to write in the New York Times,

When I asked Valerie Jarrett, Obama's longtime friend and mentor who is now a senior adviser to the president, about his relative silence on urban poverty, she said that the way the president spoke about poverty as a candidate in Anacostia -- as a unique problem specific to one group of Americans -- simply wasn't the right way for him to speak about it as president. A better approach, Jarrett said, was for the president to propose and support a set of broad programs that raised all Americans economically, an approach that she described as inclusive. She added: "I think our chances for successfully helping people move from poverty to the middle class is greater if everyone understands why it is in their best interest that these paths of opportunity are available for everyone. We try to talk about this in a way where everyone understands why it is in their self-interest."<sup>126</sup>

This then begs the question about what McGee labels as the commonplace application of the ideograph. How can this thesis continue to argue that “poverty” is an ideograph when the term has lost meaning, or no longer plays as large of a role in the political discourse? On one hand we can acknowledge that the lack of communication can also be framed as a particular example of communication. For the term “poverty” to no longer hold political weight does not mean that the implications of the term are meaningless. In fact, it takes

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<sup>126</sup> “The Birth of Obama the Politician”, *Paul Tough*, August 9, 2012

on the role of constructing a completely new narrative, one where we talk about the poor without talking about poverty. In this way the term “poverty” becomes normalized through its lack.

As Vaclav Havel argues in his work The Power of the Powerless, “what mattered was not inner belief in the propositions of the ruling ideology, but following the external rituals and practices in which this ideology acquired material existence.”<sup>127</sup> It is not that the dominant ideology is no longer normalized through the ideograph, but rather that the very ways we address the fact of poverty are now the culpable actions in regards to the narrative. The ideograph takes on new meaning, not as means to oppression, but in the fact of oppression itself. The fact that the term no longer is active in the public political discourse means that those who control the narrative of poverty are those elites who are maintained in power by the fact of ideology, and at the same time it is in this justification of power to shape the narrative that the poor are most harmed; they are removed as there is no longer a “public” discourse but a discourse narrated to the public. This means that the dominant ideology and the normative vision are no longer held by the public, or the political agents in the democratic system, but rather by those who control the very role that language plays in defining the use of power.

What this chapter argues is that “poverty” still circulates in the national discourse but in a much different light than we see in the 1960s. Instead we have moved past what “poverty” is to how it is that we address poverty; namely through the market or through the State. I argue that the modern American conception of poverty focuses on the idea of

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<sup>127</sup> Zizek, Slavoj. *The Year of Dreaming Dangerously*. London: VERSO, 2012. Print. 90

unemployment, or the fact that someone is labeled as poor is due to their lack of employment. We might say that such a conception is not far off from what we would consider the functional definition for poverty, as to have fewer sources of incomes means a higher likelihood of lacking basic needs. Still we can see that this is not only a continuance of the Johnsonian narrative about opportunity, but also that we see a move away from the discussion of the cycle of poverty, and the other factors that may lead to an individual lacking an opportunity. I also look at the proposed solutions to the fact of poverty, and specifically at how the paradigms argue we can create employment. What we arrive at is that the definition of poverty becomes tied to the inherent tensions of capital, by the fact that when one is poor it is that they no longer participate politically in the market through the guise of capital.

I first want to begin by filling in some of the holes in the story that this thesis is creating about the narrative of poverty in the American political discourse. I recognize that fifty years separate Obama and LBJ and during that time we had seven different Administrations. It would be fair to say that each impacted the fact of poverty in some way, whether it be the admittance into a foreign war, or a new brand of economics. While I admit that the story does not stop, I would argue that the main characters in the plot must be Obama and LBJ. This is case for two reasons; the first is that this chapter will analyze the poverty narrative in relation to the Democratic Party. The second is that the belief in the connection between Obama and Johnson is created in the very narrative that this thesis seeks to understand and explain. As Paul Tough writes, “The idea that Obama hasn't done much for poor Americans is simply not true; by some measures,

he has done more than any other recent president” (The Birthplace of Obama the politician). So there is an assessment from the advocates of poverty reform that Obama has made large attempts to focus on the need of the American poor, and this separates him from his predecessors. While merely mentioning the fact that poverty is at the heart of both men’s politics is not enough to show a direct connection we also see that the ways in which LBJ and Obama describe their policies are very similar. As David Brooks writes,

“It’s the theory President Obama sketched out at the beginning and end of his State of the Union address: Society works best when it is like a military unit -- when everybody works together in pursuit of a mission, pulling together as one. But a realistic antipoverty program works in the opposite way. It’s not like a military unit. It’s like a rain forest, with a complex array of organisms pursuing diverse missions in diverse ways while intertwining and adapting to each other.”<sup>128</sup>

So not only do Obama and LBJ advocate for a central plank of poverty elimination, they also choose to argue the military metaphor in order to gain support for their plans.

The other connection is the focus of Obama’s 2008 campaign, which centered around the concept of the urban poor in a way that we have not seen since LBJ. We may argue that Clinton uses the concept of the welfare reform to gain political support, but the issue then is welfare not poverty. During the Clinton/Gore campaign of “ending welfare as we know it” Clinton takes a step away from the Johnsonian public ethic, and instead advocates for the spirit of personal responsibility that was endorsed previously by Reagan.<sup>129</sup> We can see from this that the conception from the Clinton Administration was

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<sup>128</sup> “Flooding the Zone”, *New York Times*, September 7, 2012

<sup>129</sup> Asen, Robert. *Visions of Poverty: Welfare Policy and Political Imagination*. East Lansing: Michigan State UP, 2002. Print. 180

in fact quite the opposite of LBJ. When LBJ wants to expand access to government support, Clinton wished to slash and burn the numbers on the welfare rolls.

Robert Asen refers to the Clinton era as a “new form of paternalism.”<sup>130</sup> Under this new model there was no public but a contract signee and the contract holder.<sup>131</sup> So while LBJ acts paternally to increase access to the system, and to fight for the poor against that system, Clinton becomes a manifestation of the enemy that Johnson creates. For Johnson there are three actors, the State, the system, and the poor. The poor are unable to act for themselves as they lack material needs, and therefore political agency. This means that the poor must ally with the army of the State in order to check back against the system of capitalism in order to make it more compassionate in its aims. Clinton argues that the system is not the issue, but the poor themselves. Therefore we, the State, must tell you, the poor, how to act or how to live to remove yourselves from poverty.

This can be seen clearly in the Clinton Administration’s emphasis on reducing welfare dependency. As Robert Greenstein, Clinton appointee to the Bipartisan Commission on Entitlement and Tax Reform, stated, “what ought to be our most important goal is reducing long-term welfare dependency.”<sup>132</sup> While this may seem to be a worthwhile enterprise, to allow for those who live in poverty to provide for themselves, in a way that they want, and through the perceived dignity of work, what we really see is a pragmatic consequence of the contract model of poverty reduction. As Asen argues,

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<sup>130</sup> *ibid*

<sup>131</sup> Asen, Robert. *Visions of Poverty: Welfare Policy and Political Imagination*. East Lansing: Michigan State UP, 2002. Print. 181

<sup>132</sup> *ibid* 149

“reducing dependency meant requiring recipients to alter their behavior”<sup>133</sup>. Through our effort to reform the welfare system, we also sought to reform the welfare recipient, the actions of the individual are those we blame, as opposed to where Johnson orients our aggression, the State. Therefore the accepted perception of poverty during the Clinton era was a strong break in the Democratic Party’s pattern that Johnson starts, and that which Obama seeks to finish. In fact, to use the language of Cornel West and Travis Smiley the Clinton era ought to be labeled as the “War on Welfare” and a direct attack on the War on Poverty.<sup>134</sup>

We also see that where Clinton wants to lead us is also problematic, as it removes all chance for the political agency of the poor. To hold that poverty is a manifestation of failed personal choices, and also to hold that we must push you away from these actions necessarily strips whomever we choose to label as poor of any ability to voice a legitimate political opinion. If we blame the poor for their own destruction why does the national narrative allow for any admittance of the poor or their advocacy? What we see from the Clinton Administration is the opposite of what I would hold to be a viable option in order to remove the poor from their lack of material needs being met. Instead we ought to strive for a political space where the voices of the poor are able to provide a real conception of the solution, instead of relying on a population that knows nothing what it is like to live in this state.

Why then Obama? Other than a similar advocacy why do we need to identify the connection between the current president and a former? It is because history is about to

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<sup>133</sup> *ibid*

<sup>134</sup> *ibid* 63

repeat itself. According to the 2011 Census report around 1 in 6 Americans live at or below the poverty line.<sup>135</sup> That is 46.2 million human beings who live at a level that even the government argues is problematic. In defense Rebecca M. Blank, the acting United States commerce secretary, argued, "if President Obama not taken swift and aggressive action to grow our economy and create jobs, today's report would have shown much higher poverty rates, lower incomes and a greater share of the population without health insurance" (Horowitz). So the argument from the Administration is not that poverty does not exist, but that not enough has been done to combat poverty as we currently see it. It is a fair point to reference the recession and other political circumstances inherited by the current Administration as a root cause of the growing numbers, but we ought to take this with a grain of salt. Rather we must ask why is it that poverty is back at the rate of the 1960s, the time right before the War on Poverty?<sup>136</sup> There are two reactions that we can make to this information; the first is that the War on Poverty was a failure. The policies has not been effective at erasing poverty over the past 60 years, and rather the policies implemented, and the capital invested, has led to a zero gain, or a return to where we are. What we can argue is that while Johnson sets out to change and alter the system to benefit the poor he instead strengthens that system; the system that creates poverty is still a legitimate functioning paradigm.

The second reaction, and what this section seeks to examine, is what are the differences in the proposed actions of Obama and LBJ and what are their implications?

This chapter argues that while operating at different times and in different political

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<sup>135</sup> "Wealth Gaps Rise to Record Highs Between Whites, Blacks, Hispanics." *Pew Social Demographic Trends RSS*. N.p., 26 July 2011. Web. 21 Apr. 2013.

<sup>136</sup> *ibid*



climates the options endorsed by Obama are similar to those argued for under the War on Poverty. In fact it is Johnson that motivates Obama today, and the Democratic Party that maintains this line.

Where does this leave us in regards to the stated goal of this chapter? So far I have argued that we can identify the similarity in the narrative of poverty argued for by both LBJ and Obama, and that we can look past the Clinton Administration as it offered a clean break from this narrative. I also have argued that we ought to reject the narrative that is argued for by Clinton as it is the manifestation of the enemy that Johnson looks to defeat in the War on Poverty. Going forward in this chapter I look at the role that idea of poverty plays in relation to the political superstructure of the United States. Specifically, what role does the idea of poverty play in the modern era, and what implications can we expect based on this conception?

### Jobs, Jobs, Jobs

In terms of discussing poverty the Obama Administration has taken many steps to make sure that we talk about jobs instead of the poor; the jobs they will get and not the ones they do not have now. In fact, when the discussion was not focused on brief national security debate the term “jobs” is everywhere. Not only is it the Obama Administration who has picked up this connection, but also those who write about the actions taken about by the government everyday. As was written in the Washington Post in an article titled “Poor Showing: The Senate Picks a Bad Time to let a Good Jobs Program Lapse”,

“Children who grow up in poverty are more likely to be poor as adults. They lag behind early in intellectual development, tend to attend lower-quality schools and are more likely to drop out of high school. It's not surprising that poverty would rise during an economic downturn. But the current recession -- marked by increased levels of long-term unemployment and homelessness -- could have a particularly brutal and long-lasting effect on the children hit by it.”<sup>137</sup>

There is no discussion about whether the cycle of poverty like we saw during the 60s, the fact that education is not acceptable means that the child will fall into the trap; there is no debate. We see the linkage between the fact of an economic downturn and the rising rates of childhood poverty, and even a prediction about the future of these children. We can also see that while I have argued that the term “poverty” disappears from the language of the President, we do see that this article does in fact engage the idea of the poor but in a way that can seem problematic. While the article is willing to tie the idea of homelessness and unemployment to poverty it is the middle statement that seems the most interesting: “It's not surprising that poverty would rise during an economic downturn”. Why is this the case?

Even in the attempt to frame the issue of poverty the author is unable to move past the language of capitalism and economics as a justification for the fact of poverty. As Žižek argues, “Capitalism has once again become the name of the problem”, but yet there is no condemnation of the system, but rather an acceptance of the fact of poverty that is inherently tied to the oppression of capital. Much like I opened this chapter with the work of Havel, the belief in the morality of capitalism is made materially real in discourses such as this. Poverty is regrettable, but not unavoidable. Poverty then is

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<sup>137</sup> “Poor Showing: The Senate Picks a Bad Time to let a Good Jobs Program Laspse” *New York Times* 1 October 2012

normalized in its material existence, namely in that poverty exists and the conversation ends.

In the Wall Street Journal we find a similar but differing message as the editorial “Wealth and Poverty” states,

“The moral claim of Obamanomics is that it ensures that everyone pays his “fair share,” but its early returns show this agenda is producing more poverty. In their obsession with income shares and how many people have how much wealth, the Obama Democrats are imposing policies that ensure only that there will be less wealth for everyone to spread around.”<sup>138</sup>

We can again see an acceptance of poverty as problematic, but in this case tied to the fact of overall wealth. For the first article we see that poverty is linked with a declining economy, as in that the economic downturn caused poverty in some way, and the second article which argues that the way to stop poverty is by spreading more of the wealth around, by not taking any of the wealth from the market. What does that really mean? Instead of talking about poverty in the individual Johnson’s narrative of poverty is maintained, and that we have moved to how basic to look at the factors of the system that causes poverty. The market is the location of poverty, but at this time is it the government to be blamed, or is it the government’s lack of action due to the market? It is with this political firestorm that we find the location of Obama as a beacon of hope.

This idea of “Obamanomics” while seemingly framed in a way that is meant in a satirical light, nonetheless can be understood as the approach that Obama has brought to the White House. While it is the team that he has assembled to create this theory, and not necessarily himself, the fact that Obama and Obamanomics means that the president is

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<sup>138</sup> “Wealth and Poverty”, *The Wall Street Journal*

held to control large factors of the market. Once again Johnson's conception that the State exists in order to combat and fight the War on Poverty for the poor against the market is continued. Obama is expected to act against the market either by doing a better job at growing the overall pie or building for the individual. How does one address poverty and at the same time grow the market as a whole? The answer for Obama is to create jobs. These can help the poor find work, but also grow the nation as a whole.

While we do see a drastic drop in the number of times we find the term "poverty" appearing in the political discourse, every time that we do there is this link to the fact of employment and not being poor anymore. As written in the New York Times article entitled "For Jobs It's War",

"And it's not that most of these people don't have jobs. It's that they don't have good jobs that pay enough to push them out of poverty. Three out of four of those below the poverty line work: half have full-time jobs, a quarter work part time. Only a quarter do not work at all."<sup>139</sup>

So then to not be poor is not only to have a job, but to have a "good job". The article continues to describe what a "good job" is, "(He defines a good job, also known as a formal job, as one with a "paycheck from an employer and steady work that averages 30-plus hours per week.)" The "he" in this article of Jim Clifton, the chairman of Gallup. It might be interesting to note that under the functioning definition of the "poverty line" during the Obama Administration in order for a parent of a family of four to have this job would mean that the hourly wage would be \$14.35 without factoring in taxes. Now do we know that the speaker would defend this 30 hour work week, I do not. What we can

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<sup>139</sup> "For Jobs It's War, *New York Times*, September 17, 2011

say is that if we hold to this standard what we see is a functional lack in understanding of income and work and poverty. To receive this good job does little when there is not job like this open to everyone who is considered to be in poverty.

Even if this is not what Clifton believes when we look to his words later in the piece we find another interesting line, “the coming world war is an all-out global war for good jobs.”<sup>140</sup> So then not only is the war on poverty inherently tied to this conception of the market but the very fact that the market rewards competition means that the war on poverty moves to a war amongst the poor for that scarce resource of a job. Again even the State’s actions are inherently tied to a conception of this “good job”, a goal that is ultimately unreachable for the many. Why then do we call these “good jobs”?

Another noteworthy article from the New York Times states,

“Poverty and joblessness go hand in hand. If unemployment rises in the coming year from today's 6.5 percent to 9 percent, as some analysts predict, another 7.5 million to 10.3 million people could become poor, according to a new study by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities.”<sup>141</sup>

Written at the end of 2008 sadly the prediction made has come true and we see that poverty is tied to employment. Within the system to not have a job means to not have access to the resources to not live in poverty. Therefore poverty is defined as being jobless.

We can then look to an editorial written in the Philadelphia Inquirer as offering the answer to our next step, how to we create jobs?

“The persistent poverty Philadelphia has endured for years can't be erased with incremental changes in tax policy. That pace will only guarantee the despair of

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<sup>140</sup> *ibid*

<sup>141</sup> “Sewing Up the Safety Net”, *New York Times*, November 27, 2008

another generation. Jobs are needed now. There must be a better plan to produce them.”<sup>142</sup>

Titled “The Answer is Jobs” we get the answer very quickly as the article argues that without action now, without creating jobs now, we doom the next generation. So if we are to not act and do not create new jobs the current generation will be responsible for dooming the next generation to a live without employment. That is the new ethic being offered by these editorials. While we maintain the ideas from Johnson that poverty is tied to a cycle, and that the State has a duty to challenge the facts of poverty, we now see that we ought not act on the public ethos, but due to our participation in the cycle of poverty.

The fact that these authors miss is that while the cycle of poverty ought be the location of a challenge to the facts of poverty, the same market factors that determine employment are also those which allocate education, transportation, and welfare funds; the roots causes of the cycle. To not have a job means a material barrier to education, and therefore the logic is that offering you a job gives you access to that education. What Johnson has already taught us is that factors like outsourcing and technological advancements are the factors to continuing unemployment, and therefore the State ought to fight for you. What this series of editorials now shows is that the State has become a vehicle to the market, as the fact of the struggle for good jobs means there are less good jobs, and the all of those look like jobs created on the monthly economic progress report.

So then even if this is the case how does the government choose to talk about poverty, without talking about the poor, but instead the jobless? The next tactic is to

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<sup>142</sup> “The Answer is Jobs”, *Philadelphia Inquirer*, October 2, 2010

argue that by helping the poor we are helping the whole society; we are growing the whole pie. As written in the Philadelphia Inquirer:

“Lawmakers in Washington increasingly will focus on deficit reduction, with good reason. But extending unemployment insurance until the economy is stronger will have a minimal impact on deficits. Allowing it to expire when many more families are in danger of falling into poverty will further harm the economy by affecting businesses where they shop.”<sup>143</sup>

This article offers another stark picture of what will happen if we do not help the poor, again not aimed at stopping the poor from suffering, but that the local businesses will be harmed. So then when I do nothing to help the poor I should really be looking at local businesses as the source of how I judge a community’s health? I understand that the local “Shops” will be affected by this lack of assistance but we can here see the difference in the politics of the poor, just in how we talk about them. While Johnson was willing to describe the faces of the poor because poverty was politically unpopular the current political paradigm does not want to talk about the poor in specifics, but rather as an extension of a system by which they benefit as well.

The reason we do not talk about poverty is that it reflects the failure of past programs, but also forces politicians to be connected to the face of the poor, and the failures of the current system. Poverty is politically unpopular because to address poverty means to admit it exists, and that the current regime and its mechanisms have not succeeded, but in fact thrown more into the ranks of poverty. The narrative then paints assistance to the poor as a part of a larger communal duty, or that we must look to why poverty is harmful for us, here, and not those who are over there. And yet, this same

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<sup>143</sup> “Thankful But in Need”, *Philadelphia Inquirer*, November 25, 2010

approach seems to haunt the ranks of the Civil Rights movement that came to fruition under Johnson. It was the call of separate but equal that was refuted, and in the long term rejected. Why is it then that our response to poverty is grounded in this same mentality? Not only are we asked to look to our own gain as the justification for action against the poor, but the inherent framing of this culpability is grounded in a belief that economics can also be separate but equal. This is not to say that a private citizen investing in the community is not also beneficial to neighbors, but rather that the framing of the issue is the reason why we fail to address the root causes. The tension in this argument is that on one hand it asks us to think of our economic duty in terms of the whole, but the ways in which wealth is framed against the background of capital is through the individual. Wealth is owned by the individual, and yet poverty seems to be owned by the community. We are drawn in this passage by the fear of the harm to the larger economy, why do we not just state the issues as human beings who lack their basic needs?

This narrative continues in the New York Times.

“A neighborhood is a moral ecosystem, and Obama, the former community organizer, seems to have a better feel for that. It's not only policies we're looking for in selecting a leader, it's a sense of how the world works. Obama's plan isn't a sure-fire cure for poverty, but it does reveal an awareness of the supply forces that can't be measured and seen.”<sup>144</sup>

What this article tells us is that when I help the other I help myself because we are part of this larger community, we're in the American family. This is our neighborhood, and our home. It appeals at the American Dream located in the rugged individual who can make it on her own but at the same time needs the other. And yet, what this narratives hides seems to be what McGee argues is the purpose of the ideograph; to create a new view of

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<sup>144</sup> “Edwards, Obama, and the Poor”, *New York Times*, July 31<sup>st</sup>, 2007



the people. Under this conception of the people we are told we belong, but at the same time the acceptance of the narrative we are further from this community that is offered. That same narrative of helping ourselves through the community masks the meaning of earlier articles offering us a glimpse of the battle for jobs, and the reduction of the fight between the self and the other. So then I can help the poor to better compete for the jobs, and the system goes around and around. I will always be afraid of living in poverty, but yet can feel good about my support even when I support the fact of poverty, through the source of poverty. This is the blinding that is offered by the ideograph. Not in how we define “poverty”, but in how we use the narrative to hide the brute fact that, as Cornel West writes “American society is a chronically racist, sexist, homophobic, and jingoistic one”<sup>145</sup>.

The power of the narrative lies in the two pronged approach, the first that it is appealing and the second that it is plausible. Why living within the background of capitalism would a citizen not endorse a chance to have their community and eat it to? We find comfort within the shared experiences of the other, as long as they allow us to remain safe and free in our interaction with the other.

It is the plausibility of the narrative that interests me in relation to the project at hand. Why does it make sense? As Peg O’Connor writes in her book Oppression and Responsibility, “our eagerness to believe that only certain individuals were responsible for these racist crimes, and that the rest of us white people were not responsible in any

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<sup>145</sup> West, Cornel. *The Cornel West Reader*. New York, NY: Basic Civitas, 1999. Print. 270

way.”<sup>146</sup> O’Connor is writing in response to Clinton’s 1996 National Church Arson Task Force and its attempt to locate the point of culpability within the community. What O’Connor asks is in regards to which is more culpable the agent who lit the match, or the background that allows for the ideals of racism to be taught and engrained in the fabric of the community? In regards to poverty the same formula seems to hold true, rather than racism and white people, we ought to reframe what she argues as our eagerness to believe that only certain individuals are responsible for poverty, and that the rest of us are not responsible in any way. We are drawn to the fact of the individual by the liberal state and this leads to us to deny culpability as we all can make free decisions. But as Žižek states, “the reason we feel free is we lack the very language to articulate our own unfreedom.”<sup>147</sup> It is then not the fact of the narrative, but what language the background allows that allows us to be co-opted and used by the system to create the inherent drive to support the system.

### Economic Solutions to Political Issues

I find that another interesting example of the modern political conception of the alleviation of poverty can be located in the recent push by the President Obama to increase the minimum wage to \$9 from its current standard at \$8. What this example offers is a characterization of the economic solution to the political issue of poverty.

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<sup>146</sup> O’Connor, Peg. *Oppression and Responsibility: A Wittgensteinian Approach to Social Practices and Moral Theory*. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State UP, 2002. Print. 42

<sup>147</sup> Žižek, Slavoj. *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*. New York, NY: Wooster, 2001. Print.

From Obama's own language we find that the goal of this policy is to provide a more decent standard of living to the domestic poor.

The issue that I find with this approach is one that has already been mirrored in this paper in that the attempt to increase the capital that families have access to necessarily ought be framed as an economic solution to a political problem. Specifically in that due to the phrasing of the idea of "poverty" as joblessness there is a push by the Administration and therefore the public to offer more assistance to the "working poor", which this thesis would contrast with the conception of the "poor". Why then ought we condemn this rise in wages? It seems that even if we are to be critical of the reasoning or logic behind the increase there still seems to be some benefit in those who are employed having access to more capital. And yet, if we look to the implications of this policy we necessarily ought to reframe our analysis of the Administration in terms of addressing the root causes to the fact of poverty instead of the appearance of cosmetics of poverty.

We first need to realize that such an increase in wages does not necessarily mean an increase in the facts of production and demand. Rather looking to the current economic crisis there is reason to believe that both of these factors will continue to decrease. Therefore even if there is some argument to be made, we need to realize that to pay a worker a dollar extra per hour on a eight hour day, means that we are now paying one worker with the same capital that is needed to pay a worker for a single hour. If we take this to a large corporation, say with a thousand employees, we find that in order to pay all of these workers one extra dollar per hour would also cover the wages of 111 hours of work prior. This means that if we apply the same eight hour work day we find

that the extra cost passed along to the employer is equivalent to paying 13 workers. This leaves the corporation to make a decision; either increase the current profit margin to account for this new increase, or to look at cutting expenses, such as employees and benefits. Either way this seems to be problematic for the poor. Either prices increase and their new additional increase in pay is now already accounted for by new price, or workers are laid off to account and therefore have no access to the capital necessary for these purchases in the first place.

What does this mean? If the corporation is forced to cut in other areas, this places funding for items such as healthcare and education incentives in jeopardy. This means that even if workers are in fact being paid more they necessarily will need to enter the market for these other goods that they did not need to compensate for in the first place. One again there is not real gain through the policy. I find that the really important consequence is one not located in the domestic political arena but globally. If corporations do not choose to lay off workers and the price is passed along to the consumer we necessarily decrease the funds available on the production side of the equation. It is common knowledge that a majority of the goods manufactured for consumption within the United States are produced in harmful working conditions in sweatshops and factories in “developing counties” such as China and Vietnam. If a corporation, say Wal-Mart, needs to find that difference somewhere it necessarily will attempt to drive down the costs of production. This is passed along to the global poor in two ways. Either we see that the catastrophes that already occur due to greed, taking as

my example the garment fires, will continue to occur in attempt to save capital, or the workers themselves may find themselves expected to work “harder” or without a job.

From this we see that when we attempt to locate the issue of “poverty” in an economic lens we necessarily have large impacts on our own poor and the poor that live in the rest of the world. Why is this the case? I argue that when this thesis argues that “poverty” and our attempt to locate the solution to poverty we necessarily must treat the fact of poverty as a political issue. This is not to say that there is no economic factor, for to be poor is to lack capital, but rather that an attempt to correct economic inequality without correcting political inequalities leads us back to the same starting line. Without addressing the differences that exist in political representation and activism we can never locate a solution to the background of social and economic inequality. Once again we see that the myth of capital is the framing of the issue, but fails to address the radical oppression located within the theory of capitalism. This idea will always require a poor class in order to create a cheap, fluid labor force; therefore the continuation of “competition”. Instead we ought to argue that when we address poverty without looking to issues of education and access to necessary resources we fail to address the fact of the oppression; the location of capital as a “just” economic system that provides opportunity and freedom in return for risk.

This conception offers the framing for the next and final chapter of this thesis. I argue that where we see the real impact of the ideographic of poverty is in the way we talk about the factors of poverty; the market and the state. In a discussion of who creates more jobs and better jobs we really find the root causes of the market and the state and a

look into the democratization of the market. It is the belief that we are autonomous agents that blinds us to reality of our own enslavement. For as Žižek continues, “Words are never 'only words'; they matter because they define the contours of what we can do.” This is the normative task that this thesis prescribes, how is it that we can reject the oppressive narratives that constitute our current identities, and yet at the same time create fundamental change? It is in the recognition that narratives not only define what we can do, but what we cannot. The system itself is framed in a way that denies the ability to promote change as the current state of the narrative defines that the radical dream of equality as external to the contours of what we *can* do.

## Chapter Four

### *Political Economy and Radical Philosophy*

In this final chapter I wish to move to focus of this thesis slightly to expand into the normative modes of operation that can be employed in relation to the fact of poverty. This chapter's goal is to not move away from the discussion of poverty as a ideograph, but instead to refocus our attention to the attempts to reduce poverty. This said I address both the State and market as potential agents for this change. Next I move to identify the roles that specific policies play within these systems. Finally, I want to close by focusing on the role that rhetoric must play in any attempt to alleviate the fact of poverty moving forward, and in doing so I wish to identify the role that language plays in the direct application of politics and practices.

#### The State

Over the course of this thesis I have used the term "State" as a synonym for government, or the political process as located in the powers of the government. In this way the State is the actor of powers that are given to the physical representation of the government. Before we begin to look at the identification of the State as a potential ally in the continuing War on Poverty I think it might be useful to step back and analyze what is actually at stake when we are addressing the State. What we can immediately notice is that the State is not just government, but rather a collective normative vision of a set population. Referring back to what McGee argues we see that in fact the State is the ultimate political myth, and yet this thesis continues to argue that different narratives

must also exist within this myth. The idea of the State is just that, an idea. If every single American citizen stopped believing in the power of the federal government that political body would be unable to continue to coerce and dictate economic and domestic policies.

This said, this agent still holds massive ability to coerce and create mass understanding. It is interesting in relation to the more recent Tea Party movement that the population has created the idea that we need to shrink the role of government, but this group is still willing to follow the rules and regulations of that government. Protests may be inconvenient for the State, but the protesters themselves apply for permits, organize, and endorse principles of nonviolence, for the most part. And yet, for all the anti-Obama rhetoric that we see coming from the signs and mouths of these agents, their issue is not with the idea of the State but the functional definition of the actions of the State. They are in favor of a military for national defense but would reject “government hand-outs”. This paradox has also been readily shown within this thesis in relation to the conception of poverty as those who oppose the assistance that the State offers to the poor still use the “poverty line”, as defined by the State, in order to create persuasive arguments or to document those who are identified within a policy of action.

This means that the narrative of the State itself constitutes the voice of the rejection of the State. Why is it that even those who push for “small-government” still wish to tie themselves philosophically to the democratic style of government? Does this not mean that the rejection of the State by protesters is then not a rejection of the “State”, but rather how it functions in relation to our idea of the individual? This is why I wish to



look a bit closer at what it is that makes up the idea of the State, as this would at least place this thesis in a location to better examine the arguments made for the political myth of poverty as it exists within the political myth of the State. It seems that when our view of the poor is directly related to the power of the State, and the functional actions of the State the two myths feed and play off the other. To argue that there are poor is also to raise the question of what obligation do others have in relation to the fact of poverty? When we are formed within the State we necessarily must look to the effects of the political myth of the State as a means of not only constituting what is poverty but also our own social relation to the political process as a whole. For this I turn to the social archeologist Michel Foucault and his work on the concept of “bio-power”.

In his series of lectures given at the College of France in 1978 Foucault took on the conception of the separation of the market and the State, only to uncover the very interconnectedness of the two political myths. He argues that we ought to consider the idea of “political economy” as opposed to separating the power of both, as they are two heads of the same snake.<sup>148</sup> As for the factors that constitute the physical manifestation of the State, i.e. the government and its buildings, Foucault places the ability to form the State in a process that he calls “critical governmental reasoning.”<sup>149</sup> For Foucault this is the power of the individual to engage with the other, and to form a community located around a central ideal. What is interesting about Foucault’s analysis of the issue is that he argues that this ability does not appear in historical contexts until the emergence of the

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<sup>148</sup> Foucault, Michel. *The Birth of Biopolitics*. New York: Picador, 2004. Print. Pg 5

<sup>149</sup> Ibid 13

democratic process.<sup>150</sup> At this point there is no longer the opposition to the ever expanding influence of the sovereign, but now the sole holder of political authority was the people, in the vehicle of the government.<sup>151</sup> Never before was a citizen able to actually influence the power or the use of power of the State, as the State was created as a myth foreign to the understanding of the everyday populous.

For Foucault the holders of political agency are the very agents who live under the fear of the State every day, the citizens of the commonwealth. In fact, the very nature of the democratic process means that the government we elect is very much different from the government in the real. To use the Lacanian terms, the symbolic State is that which we cast a ballot for, and the images that grace our TV screens on election nights are merely a representation of a concept that is constantly forming and changing organically. The perception of the State is created and framed against the background that gives meaning to the physical entities of the State. Our minds and perceptions are so guided by the ideological factors, i.e narratives, that give meaning to a community that it is impossible to engage with the State in the Real.

Take an example from modern political debate. When President Obama makes a speech describing the grim results of a school shooting, what are the responses from the media? CNN will offer a fact based account of what was offered in the speech, MSNBC will argue that Obama is setting the table for a larger debate on gun control, and Fox News will argue that the President is infringing on our Second Amendment Rights. These are three diverse, and yet true, descriptions we apply the coverage back to the base

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<sup>150</sup> *ibid*

<sup>151</sup> *ibid*

of the community that is drawn to these distinct voices. What we can say further is that even the events themselves, the Real, are already corrupted by the ideologies that facilitated the reaction to the event, or the reason for the event in the first place. In this way the government, and its action, becomes whatever we as the commonwealth have normalized to be the State. We see that in some cases civil disobedience has created a new narrative to challenge that which existed, created a momentary tear in the fabric of democracy.

Take the example of Tahrir Square in Cairo during what has been labeled the “Arab Spring” by the West. Did not the gatherings of the masses in the square serve to create a functional voice for the people and yet at the same time to promote or create the idea of social and class consciousness in the minds of the Egyptian people? The Square itself became a new political space that while still existing under the coercive power of Mubarak’s regime was able to create dissident voice that made such politics ineffective and unenforceable. Take the role that Christian activists played in forming circles around their Muslim counterparts during times of prayer. In a country that seemingly attempted to differentiate the population in relation to their political allegiance did not such a gesture show the unification of the population in a way that was very much different than that of the State? The attacks on the protectors sought to diminish the effectiveness of the movement at yet at these time, and yet also gave a glimpse about what “Egypt” meant to the Egyptians as opposed to the Egyptian government. In this way the power of the government is only stretched as far as we, the people allow for the stretching to continue. The public can create a narrative that is distinct from the power of the State, but one that

is still tied to the State in the rejection of that State. This means that any narrative of political identity relies on the conception of governance, even if in the rejection of that power structure.

What then on political economy, how does this conception of the State also control the dominant paradigms of economics, namely capitalism? This is where the myth begins to unravel for Foucault, as we think that we control the narrative of the State but in reality the idea is ruled by the same force that drives us, capital. As Foucault states, “political economy is a sort of general reflection on the organization, distribution, and limitation of powers in a society. I think fundamentally it was political economy that made it possible to ensure the self-limitation of governmental reason.”<sup>152</sup> This is why the term “political economy” comes to hold so much of the ideographical implications of the conception of poverty. On one hand the term argues that the political and economic are intertwined, or the belief that one can manage or control the other. On the other side we live in a social narrative that argues for the democratic control of the market, even when such a conception is inherently paradoxical. In order to be governed by the democratic process, the market would need to function based on a conception which combines the voter and the consumer. In fact we hear this very often in the form of “you vote with your dollar”. And yet we understand that politics becomes a process dictated by the very idea it keeps to govern. When it takes more than a billion dollars to run for and become president who then is to say that this politician elected to represent the state is in some place that she can control capital? By the very fact that the poor become poor through

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<sup>152</sup> Ibid 13

the processes of the market, and then cannot use their lack of employment to donate to a campaign or take the time to canvass how then do their voices get heard? This is why the narrative of the state is problematic.

We can also see an interesting work that is consistent with Foucault that arises from the work of Alain Badiou. In his book The Rebirth of History Badiou argues that “a separating name refers to a particular way of not resembling the fictive identitarian object.”<sup>153</sup> The idea of the identitarian object is the normalization of the ideal citizen, that which we would hold as the perfect American. We can collect the list of traits that we can apply to this image, but I feel that the idea of the American Dream is also able to provide us this list. We see that the American conception of “pulling yourself up by your boot straps” is located in this image and the connected understanding of terms thrown out in the current political debates. The idea of a “job creator” as being sacred, or the lack of motivation that the poor seemingly show through their dependence on the State shows the actualization of this narrative still in the modern conception. The ideal American I argue is inherently tied to the understanding of her hard work, her success, and her family. While we can argue that these terms lack any universal definition, say due to their functioning as ideographs, but also that the ideas of what they ought to mean do function as projections of the limited *public reason*. In the same way that Foucault argues that capital is a restrictive force on the expression of the governmental reason, it seems consistent that the next logical move is to apply these same factors to the public reason, or the original source of governmental reason.

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<sup>153</sup> Badiou, Alain, and Gregory Elliott. *The Rebirth of History*. London: Verso, 2012. Print. 92

As Badiou argues the separating name “enables the state to separate certain groups from the collectivity, who therefore call for particular repressive measures”<sup>154</sup>. He goes on to list terms like “immigrant” and “Muslim” as examples, but also argues that we are starting to see the label of “poor” fit the same bill. While it is true that we see little to no anti-poor protesters or no militias sitting on the borders of rich neighborhoods to keep the poor out, we do see a different form of political violence against this group. It would be political suicide to argue against the poor, but it another to argue against why they become poor, and why they continue to be poor today. What we really ought to take from Badiou’s conception is that the term “poor” has entered a place where the political will housed in the masses means little when there are threats of “fiscal cliffs” and Obama’s new socialist utopia. When the poor are seemingly the most vulnerable to political calculations and experiments, Badiou asks us whether the poor are viewed differently than the rich based on their relation to identitarian object? This thesis would answer with an emphatic YES. How else do we explain the overall lack of willingness for a meaningful public debate on poverty? When is the last time we had a President who did not make millions? When was the last time that we looked to the fact that the poor overwhelming make up the ranks of the military? Why else is there actually a conversation about whether to cut food stamps versus tax breaks for private jets? According to Badiou it seems that the American discourse about what is means to be “American” does not include the idea of being poor.

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<sup>154</sup> ibid

### “The War on Poverty”

Returning to the task at hand, it is interesting to note that in the modern discussion of whether the State is the agent that can promote change for the poor the description of the State is inherently tied to the idea of the War on Poverty. So while I have shown that the War on Poverty ought to be considered a failure, due to its unsustainable changes in the levels of poverty and its inability to correct for structural harms, there is still a functioning belief that the idea of the “War on Poverty” could be successful. This is apparent in the New York Times article “The Poverty of an Idea”,

“But the 1960s War on Poverty was not fought according to that strategy. Underfinanced and often poorly targeted, it was nevertheless not an abject failure; “community action” was a controversial and short-lived experiment, but successes from Medicaid to Head Start have endured. In politics, however, perception frequently trumps reality. We like our wars, actual and metaphorical, to deliver swift and unconditional victories, and that kind of victory was beyond the capacity of the war on poverty to deliver.”<sup>155</sup>

This author provides us with an additional reason as to why the War on Poverty failed; not enough capital was thrown at the problem in order to create the needed solution.

There is even an understanding of the difference between the War on Poverty and idea of the “War on Poverty” in this passage. Even as we are called to remember specific policies of the war, namely those like Medicaid and Head Start, it is because we won specific political victories we cannot throw away the whole campaign.

I am interested in the framing of “community action” as a controversial experiment. Not only does this term seem to apply to many different types of action, it is also interesting that the author chose to place this in tension with the successful

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<sup>155</sup> “The Poverty of an Idea”, *New York Times*, March 3, 2012

programs, all the while we realize that without the action of the community's politic there would be no agent that would endorse and implement the projects. And yet, the author also shows why the "war" is considered to be a failure; it was not "swift". Perhaps this is reading into the intentions of the writer far too much, but does not the idea of instant gratification necessarily find its home in the capitalist, hedonistic background of the American politic? Is it the policy that failed or the public's role in the standard setting for success? Even if this is too harsh ought we not look to the term "unconditional" with this same emphasis. Have we lost support for a War on Poverty because this is not a war that can be won? Perhaps it is harder to show a documentary about the increased ability of food and shelter access as opposed to the storming of Normandy Beach? What is sexier? It seems that one of the flaws of the War on Poverty is not only in the policy itself but in the rhetorical construction of the action. The military metaphors fall apart when there is no enemy to be counted, no POWS to report, or even images of major changes to show on the nightly news. Sure, we can broadcast food aid policies but these lack an ability to fit into the identitarian narrative of the American military, therefore making the difficult to locate within the American narrative of War. Remember Americans don't lose wars, we just change their name.

We see the theme of State supported anti-poverty plans continued in the article "Poverty and Recovery",

"As part of the tax-cut deal, President Obama and Congress agreed to extend federal jobless benefits in 2011, but the checks will be \$25 less a week than under the stimulus. That reduction could push an estimated 175,000 more people into poverty in 2011. The deal also included a one-year payroll tax cut that will benefit most workers, but it is less helpful to the lowest-income workers than a now-expired tax break in the stimulus."<sup>156</sup>

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<sup>156</sup> "Poverty and Recovery", *New York Times*, January 19, 2011



This justification for the State's failure is that it did not give enough capital back to the poor in the form of tax breaks. So then we have another tension, do we solve poverty through creating jobs or by offering tax breaks to the needing workers? Ignoring the fact that 8 million Americans are poor in the United States as a direct result of taxes the article paints a connections between the role of employment and taxation as means to eliminate poverty.<sup>157</sup> Past just having a job to remove yourself from poverty the government is still needed to give you more of your money back, more of your tax dollars moved away from poverty assistance for the public, and a relocation of capital in the self. In this context the solution to poverty is then tied to the individual through the collective action of the State. We locate the source of poverty in the individual and therefore must create opportunities for the singular worker as a means to combat national poverty.

This same argument is found in the Washington Post article "Anti-Poverty Initiatives that Work",

"Two important anti-poverty initiatives at risk this year are the earned-income tax credit and the child tax credit. Expansions of these credits in the 2009 American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (the stimulus bill) helped keep more than 9 million people out of poverty in 2010, nearly half of them children, according to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities."<sup>158</sup>

Again we should look to the words "risk" and "out" in reference to poverty. If we continue the tax breaks we stop the process that is currently removing individuals "out" of poverty, a state different than that which has the tax break. If we fail to act we "risk" sending them back to poverty. This then is our first clue to the truth of Badiou's

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<sup>157</sup> Smiley, Tavis, and Cornel West. *The Rich and the Rest of Us: A Poverty Manifesto*. New York: Smiley, 2012. Print. 36

<sup>158</sup> "Anti-Poverty Initiatives that Work", *Washington Post*, October 12, 2012

hypothesis; the solutions proposed by the State are those which seem most likely to help the image of the ideal American. Tax cuts for middle class families are good as they put more food on the table for the family of 4.6 persons; it seemingly does not work as well if this does not describe your own state of being, i.e. what it is to be poor.

What I find fascinating about this move towards tax cuts is the belief that such a plan would allow for universal betterment, or make the average American more likely to remove themselves from poverty. The first argument we can make is tied to the fact that tax cuts are inherently tied to the amount of capital that is being taxed. When the poor tend to pay less in taxes, if any at all thanks to Mitt Romney's 47% comment, they also are going to receive less of that sum total of tax back. Even if this is not the case, we see that these two tax policies seemingly do nothing in the long term. Receiving a tax break for your children does make it easier to put food on the table for them, but little to change the schools that they walk into. An earned income tax credit assists in bringing more of the pork back to the table, but will never undo the pork in Congress that dictates infrastructure and investment practices.

So then the solution to poverty that the State ought to undertake does little in the long term, and further places this family in danger of being separated. I say this for two reasons, the first that the State now has the ability to argue that it has made attempts to solve poverty through tax revision and now can ask the poor to do their part. The problem is first that the solution will not work, and the second is that the poor continue to do their part every single day. The second reason this places families more in danger is that it pushes us closer to the narrative of the market which I examine next.

### The Market

What we can realize from the previous discussion of the tax credit route to end poverty is that the State can make the attempt, but the role of solving poverty has been turned over to the market. By the State giving you more money in your pocket there is still a need to go and get the things that this money can now buy. In a reference back to Foucault and political economy we that this is consistent and offers more evidence by which to combine the agency of both myths. This also implies that the market is its own political myth, and this seems to be the case in reference to the myth of the State. If every single American was willing to disengage with the conception of the consumer and producer the market would cease. So too would it if we were all to realize that the conception of “capital” is also imaginary, or that capital is not real but rather a human construct. So yes the trillions of dollars the USA owes abroad is real, but only because we think it is real. This aside, the fact of the market in the role of poverty alleviation cannot be ignored and this is why now we ought to look at how the two were connected in the political discourse.

As was written in the Christian Science Monitor.

“And yet, in recent decades, powerful tools have been developed that leverage capitalism's strengths to enrich the lives of those who get left behind. Take microcredit. It has been a powerful tool in combating poverty, enabling the poorest of the poor to change their lives and provide for their families. Through these small, collateral-free loans with a nearly 100 percent return rate, borrowers - mostly women - have been able to harness entrepreneurial abilities inherent in them. Microcredit is just one example of how a business approach can help alleviate poverty when we move beyond the idea that business by definition has to mean making financial profit for the owner.”<sup>159</sup>

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<sup>159</sup> “How Social Business Can Create a World Without Poverty”, *Muhammad Yunus, February 15, 2010*

I think we should look first at the author's acceptance that capitalism leaves some behind, or the admittance that in the fact of capitalism there is an inherent connection to some not making it. This is case going back the analysis of Lyndon B. Johnson in his framing of the cycle of poverty and the facts of the system that slow the ability to move or change jobs. What is then interesting is that in the first sentence the author admits this connection, and then in the same sentence offers that the system of capitalism can be used to assist the poor. This brings us back to the claim I made that we ought to avoid a situation of consuming ourselves out of poverty for it drives us back to the very same underlying concerns. What makes this article different is that it argues that instead of the poor consuming their way out of poverty, *we* ought to consume to the poor out of their poverty by consuming what they produce. The idea is that if we offer a small amount of money then the poor will be able to access the benefits of the market in a way that changes their lives. In reference to our discussion of the ideal American this is where the separating name again rears its ugly head, as for the poor to enter the market they need to change their lives. They must buy into the myth of capitalism, that narrative which is inherently tied to the creation of poverty, in order to be removed from poverty.

While I admit that changing lives can also be understood as being able to change the lifestyle options open to the poor, we still see that the narrative has labeled the poor as lacking in this way, either materially or socially. The image of the human condition is still located in the idea of inherent capitalism or the ability to "harness entrepreneurial abilities inherent in them". In reality what is being offered is a way to reap the benefits of the market, the ability to oppress and own, in return for buying into the held

conception of a just market. If we give this to you, you can become one of us as well. In fact when the profit motive is what places so many in poverty we realize that the way to make profit is by outcompeting the other, in this case another member of the poor class, but also through the exploitation of the other in the worker. We promise the poor a route to the top, not telling them about who or what they may have to step on along the way.

Even the way that we talk about what it means to be out of poverty is tied back to a conception of material wellbeing. We see this in an article written by Paul Tough,

“Let's analysis has support from many of the academics who study how poverty has changed over time. Looking back on the lives and prospects of the American poor during President Johnson's War on Poverty, you can see two broad changes. In material terms, the trends have been mostly positive. Americans who live below the poverty line are much less likely to be hungry or malnourished today than they were then. A majority of families below the poverty line now have material possessions that would have been unthinkable luxuries in the 1960s: air-conditioning, cable TV, a mobile phone.”<sup>160</sup>

So yes the poor today are on paper better off than they were before the War on Poverty, Tough is right on this point. What we have already discussed in this thesis is the difference between material wellbeing and social wellbeing, or the factors of income inequality. It is one thing that some of the poor are better off, and it is another to say they are no longer poor. Even if poverty has now become just not rich, there are differences in the equation. When the ideal image of an American is tied to the consumption of these goods, and possibly all goods, in order for the poor to assent to or even begin to claim this label they must also buy what Americans buy. The ability to buy a phone does not

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<sup>160</sup> “The Birth of Obama the Politician”, *Paul Tough*, August 9, 2012

mean that you do not also face other issues, like failing schools or transportation infrastructure. This is why I was happy to see Tough continue,

“But while the material gap has diminished, a different kind of gap has opened between poor and middle-class Americans: a social gap. In the 1960s, most Americans, rich, middle-class and poor, were raising children in two-parent homes; they lived in relatively stable, mixed-income communities; they went to church in roughly similar numbers; their children often attended the same public schools. Today, those social factors all diverge sharply by class, and the class for which things have changed most starkly is the poor. Damien may have a cellphone, but he has never met his father.”<sup>161</sup>

So then it is not only material wellbeing that makes us no longer poor, but rather a larger structure of supports and community, not the ability to consume when there was no ability before.

## Conclusion

Over the previous pages of this thesis I have argued that the role of “poverty” as an ideograph creates a masking effect and justifies the maintained of the political myth and political will that are inherent in the creation of poverty. I demonstrated this over two historical periods, the LBJ War on Poverty and the altered narrative that emerges from the Obama Administration. I next argued that the two approaches at our disposal, namely the State and the market, ought to be conceptualized as two results of the same system, that of the imaginary and oppressive nature of capital.

The ultimate goal of this thesis is not to identify that one true route on how we eliminate the fact of poverty, as not only is there much more to learn and study, but that the closing pages of this work does not seem to be the location for that conversation.

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<sup>161</sup> *ibid*

Instead the focus of this paper has been to identify the role of the narrative in the justification of the fact of poverty, and to identify the masking role of the functional definition of poverty in relation to the systems that create oppression. While this paper has cast a critical gaze on the roles that State actions play in the facilitation of poverty I find that it is also necessary to address the rhetorical implications of the State's use of the term "poverty". In other words, how has the use of poverty by the State as a political tool affected or created unique oppression for the population labeled as "poor". Does the creation of an artificial idea of poverty, one that is not located in the face of a poor family but rather in the statistics on a page, oppress the poor who actually exist?

A compelling idea is proposed by Zizek in an op-ed he wrote for the Guardian entitled "Zero Dark Thirty: Hollywood's Gift to American Power". In the article he takes a look at the way torture is presented in the film, and questions the motivations. He critiques the director, Kathryn Biglow, of normalizing and endorsing the act of torture to the viewers of the film. Biglow argues that, "'those of us who work in the arts know that depiction is not endorsement. If it was, no artist would be able to paint inhumane practices, no author could write about them, and no filmmaker could delve into the thorny subjects of our time'".<sup>162</sup> Zizek's responds, "One does not need to be a moralist, or naïve about the urgencies of fighting terrorist attacks, to think that torturing a human being is in itself something so profoundly shattering that to depict it neutrally – ie to neutralize this shattering dimension – is already a kind of endorsement."<sup>163</sup>

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<sup>162</sup> Zizek, Slavoj. "Zero Dark Thirty: Hollywood's Gift to American Power." *The Guardian*. Guardian News and Media, 25 Jan. 2013. Web. 28 Jan. 2013.

<sup>163</sup> *ibid*

What I wish to consider is not the issue of torture but rather what occurs if we apply this same framework to a depiction of poverty? When Žižek's argument is that to re-create a situation necessarily normalizes that occurrence, we see that the argument is really arguing that what we see on the movie screen becomes our definition of torture, and this does not allow for an actual conversation on "torture" that occurs in the real world. This then results in the association of an artificial image of torture with the policy of torture.

What happens if this framing were applied to poverty? For one we find that the artificial universal image of the "welfare queen" does in fact harm the poor, as it allows for a justification for not assisting the poor. When the "welfare queen" becomes the face of poverty the poor are associated with an image that does not depict the reality of poverty, and therefore denies the connection between the policies of poverty and their results. This could be our first clue as to why attempts to eradicate poverty have failed, as the "poverty" we tried to solve was not the poverty that needed to be addressed.

Even further, as with torture the role of the State serves to normalize a neutral conception of poverty. We take the human focus away when we say that if you make X amount of money then you are not poor. This conception of poverty once again applies a universal gaze to the poor. If you are a family of four then this is the amount of money that you need to not be considered poor. What this calculation does not take into account is the hidden costs of poverty. How much does public transportation cost? What are the health care implications of a diet bought on a fixed budget? These are the questions that individualize the face of poverty and locate the fact of poverty in its own unique



conceptions. Not only are not all poor individuals the same, but the very way that they engage with the community's held narrative is different. They have differed jobs, skills, and aspirations.

For these reasons it seems that we must move the conversation about what is "poverty" to a conversation about what it is we mean when employ the term poverty. This thesis has shown the oppressive nature of the dominant conceptions of poverty, and through this final analysis on Zizek that we can identify the location of failed policies in the rhetorical construction of the issue itself. To locate the fact of poverty in a narrative separate from the real fact of poverty necessarily blinds us to role that actions may take in relation to the poor. While it may be an unsatisfactory ending to this thesis, it seems that the solution is as simple as providing more access to political participation to the poor, or those who are directly affected by the narrative. Does this take on a set political philosophical tone or normative vision, at this point I am not sure.

What does offer some idea of a potential solution is located in a movie that I watched on a flight back from China. The movie The Dark Night Rises caught my eye and I decided to watch it in order to fill a few hours of the long flight. While this thesis does not revolve around the plot or theme movie I find that there are some interesting perspectives to be taken moving forward. In the movie the hero Batman, or Bruce Wayne, is kidnapped and sent far away from Gotham City. Gotham is at the time controlled by the criminal mastermind Bane and his minions who are using a nuclear bomb to hold the population and American government in check. The hero returns to

save the city by sacrificing himself in order to detonate the bomb over the water near the city.

During the authoritative control by Bane and his followers of the city of Gotham there are a series of trials held to punish the rich of city for the crimes that they have committed against the poor. In this way the rich are punished for their status as the rich, and are turned in to the poor that they have oppressed in order to gain wealth. In this way the subject becomes the other as the rich become those who they have worked to deny. What is interesting is that while we can say that the rich take on the title of the poor, we cannot say that the rich have become the “poor”. Can the bourgeois become the proletariat? Does not the proletariat gain identity through the oppression of the oppressor? This is why at the end of the movie the city once again arises from the ashes after sharing a single threat that would wipe out all life, not just the rich or the poor.

While we may object to the framing of the rich as criminals, there is something to be said about the common experience of sharing poverty or the daunting threat that sees no class boundaries. Am I arguing that we ought to take the rich and place them on trial? Not in so many words. There does seem to be some truth in this argument though. Why is it that we allow for Microsoft and Apple to sue each other over patents but there is not a larger discussion of conflict between the rich board members of these companies and their employees? Does it take a single event like a threat of violence that the poor are as vulnerable to as the rich? This is where I will leave this thesis, with that question. In fear of sounding too radical perhaps we need to locate the Event that creates a connection between all classes. This is not to say that we should threaten with a nuclear weapon, but

perhaps there is a need to look to the violence that the poor experience every day and ask who is culpable and responsible for this state of being?

Perhaps it does mean taking those responsible for the economic crashes and struggles in our history and charging them with crimes against the poor. Perhaps it is through an action that we no longer view based on economic terms but social bonds that can create change. Why else did the 2008 Recession seem to hurt the poor more than the rich? Because the rich will always be rich and the poor will always be poor. How do we change that? Perhaps it is time to try something radically different, a community that looks to the other not in terms of what they are worth, but what inherent quality they can add to our community.

What is that metaphoric bomb from the Batman movie? Perhaps it is the realization that the one connection we all share in humanness and a return to common concerns and consciousness offers the route moving forward. From my perspective it is the realization that it is not only the poor that are violated by capitalism, but in some way the rich as well. Does not capital distance one from the other? Does not capitalism use the idea of “capital” to divide the communities into the rich and poor? This seems to also deny the rich the sense of community that is fundamental to the human experience. Perhaps the goal is then not to talk about what the term “poverty” means, but how we are all harmed by the fact of poverty.

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